

What does the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and current cost-of-living crisis tell us about the connections between poverty, inequality and child protection?

Video transcript

Speakers:

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Claire Burns:

Okay, that's 1:32pm, I think we'll just make a start, if that's okay with everybody? Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the fourth CELCIS Emerging Insights Seminar. And for those of you who don't know me, I'm Claire Burns, I am the director of CELCIS. And I'll be chairing this event. I am delighted that everybody's taking time out of what I know are really busy jobs to contribute, learn and reflect on this really important topic. The title of today's seminar, as you can see at the top is what does the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic cost of living crisis tell us about the connection between poverty, inequality, and shared protection? And as you can see, we're very much aligning our topic, today with the fact that it's Challenge Poverty Week. So, a short bit about the seminar series before we start, this is the fourth in a series of webinars that are intended for practitioners and managers and anyone responsible and interest in child protection in Scotland, to provide access to new thinking, to research, to new insights and perspectives on emerging issues, to provide the space but those are responsibility to think and, engage and ask questions, and to contribute to support the workforce with knowledge of emergent issues and insights. Because we know that those are changing all the time.

Just a little bit on wellbeing support before I introduced the speakers, because given the focus of our webinars, what is shared and discussed can be upsetting. So please take time

out, if you're needing it. During the webinar, and afterwards, we can be triggered by trauma at any point and that can be really unexpected. So I know that your cameras are switched off, but please take time if you need it and can say connect with someone you feel comfortable talking to or speak to people in confidence and those details will be put up. Okay, just to say that we are structuring the seminar a different way this time around. And instead of having one speaker, we've got a panel of speakers. And I think that very much reflects the complex interplay between poverty and inequality, and children and young people who are in need of care and protection. We know there are links in the research tells us that there are links, but we also know that these links are multifaceted, and we hope today will provide an opportunity for a greater appreciation of the nuance and complexity and what it means for us in practice. I am delighted to have three speakers that I absolutely know will stimulate your thinking and what you think of and practice. So, we'll be hearing from Anna Gupta, who's Professor of Social Work at Royal Holloway, University of London., John McKendrick, who is Professor of Social Justice at Glasgow Caledonian University and co-director of the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit, and Lisa Bunting, who is Professor of Child and Family Social Work at Queen's University, Belfast. So I think you'll agree, we have brought out the big hitters for today, in terms of public speaking, So huge thanks to them for a providing their research, their expertise and their insights. So, you're going to hear from each of the speakers in turn without a break. We'll go from Anna to John to Lisa, then I'll start to ask them some questions. And then I'm being texted questions from the floor, so there will be an opportunity for everybody to contribute, we will try and get through those as much as we can. So without further ado, can I ask Anna, if you would like to kick off your presentation. Thank you.

Anna Gupta:

Thank you, Claire. And thank you, CELCIS for inviting me. I am really pleased to be here. I'm going to share my slides now. I'm Anna Gupta. I'm Professor of Social Work at Royal Holloway, which is part of London University. Now, can you see my slip of slide?

Yes, we can Anna.

So, I'm going to first start off with slightly problematising the term child protection that was in the title. So it's what experience is connected. I'm taking a very broad view of child protection and basing it on a sort of wide perspective and thinking about the various different harms and particularly the social harms that children in our society experience. So it sort of resonates with the work I've done with people I'm sure you know, Brid Featherstone, Kate Morris and Sue White when we wrote the social model for protecting children. So, we argue in that that we need to tell another story and one that moves away from individualised notions of risk to children of parents actions or inactions, to recognising some of the social determinants of harm, and the economic social barriers faced by most of the families that were working with, and as well the protective capacities

within families. And just a reminder, really, I'll talk quite a lot today about a study I've done with young people from Black and Asian and other minority ethnic backgrounds and how that links with poverty. But just to separate out and just to contextualise something that you will all know, but I think that we need to remind ourselves about, you know, Paul Bywaters, and other colleagues of his work around the Child Welfare Inequalities Project and how really, poverty is at the core of harm to children, harm to families. And we need to think about how this intersects with lots of different factors. I just put that there - that's from the down the left corner of the graph. Children in the most affluent areas of (this as of England, but it's similar across the other countries of the UK) are about 11 times, 12 times less likely to be separated from their parents than those from deprived communities. And this raises real human rights issues. But equally, poverty in its own right, is harmful for children, as and there's the social, institutional structures such as immigration that feed into the harms that children are experiencing. I'm just raising this, I'm just seeing the work that my discussion around poverty and the other people's discussions around poverty is that we need to take an intersectional lens. So I'm looking at poverty particularly, and race, but there are other intersectional issues around disability, around gender, that we need to be thinking about, I included this this slide because this is a really good, I think report around an intersectional approach to poverty and inequality in Scotland. So I'd recommend people look at that.

So, going now to sort of COVID, the pandemic and the cost of living crisis, structural inequalities were exacerbated, but really it highlighted what was already there and how it was made worse during the pandemic. I was I really liked this cartoon, I think it really exemplified that we were all in the same storm, but we were not in the same boat. Some people are on luxury yachts and others with little boats and no oars. So, it was the same storm but different boats. And as Marmot said, Michael Marmot, that far from the great leveller, mortality from COVID-19 followed the social gradient of health inequalities. And that this was noticed quite early on in the pandemic to disproportionately impact on Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. And, and then it was the very complex, interrelated nature of inequalities that were under protected and over exposed. Then there was the, what we've termed the cost-of-living crisis. And this, again, has exposed and intensified deep fault lines in our society, and that many people are struggling, but it's not an equal opportunity crisis. It's impacting a lot more on some groups than others. But equally, I think we need to think about, you know, crisis. Crisis implies a sort of acute situation. But for many, with 12 plus years of austerity policies that have cut welfare benefits, that have reduced support services that have slashed youth services. This crisis has been going on in people's families lives for many, many years. And it's not a new issue, and we need to really see it in that way. So, I'm going to set out in that context, really about, poverty, inequality and the intersections with race, I'm going to talk particularly about a study that I've been involved with, called coPOWER, the Consortium of Practices of Wellbeing and Resilience in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Families and Communities. And this came out of the data that was showing that Black and Asian and

other minority families were disproportionately impacted. A group of us put together a funding proposal that we got that had different work packages, it was very big project. I'm just going to talk about work package two. So it's thinking about what were some of the impacts? And what can we learn from that? Around, particularly the intersection with race, and, poverty, but also gender. So, the aim was to look at the impact of racial inequalities and the pandemic on young people from racially minoritized backgrounds. And this is what we did. We did focus groups and interviews with children, parents and professionals. We also work with a creative team. So, there's a photo book and the photos from that book, and creative artists. And there's actually films that we've done as well, which I can tell you more about afterwards. So, the theoretical framework of critical race theory, and I think this was quite important to start off a study. And quite unusually, I think, saying, you know, this is about racial inequality. This is based on critical race theory and actually have a government funding it. But, you know, we're looking at how racism impacts, but it also takes an intersectional approach. And, thinking about positives as well within really minoritized communities, as well, as an understanding, there's a concept of weathering, where, you know, just the impact of living with racism was also taken into account. A very much a socio-ecological approach to children and families. I mean, it's just some of the findings. And I suppose going back to harm and social harm and child protection, it's really thinking about the wide range of aspects of children's development that, you know, living in some social and cultural contexts impacts negatively. And so this is some of the findings, we've got loads of findings, but some of the ones particularly about living with racism before, during and after the pandemic. And what really came out was a lack of trust. And lack of trust for the police was obvious, well not obvious, but you know, came up really strongly, which is not surprising. But also education, health and social services. The lack of trust in the statutory services, was really dispiriting. And certainly one of the big findings was one of the recommendations was about police, but also education and health and social work services, thinking about that lack of trust and how we can rebuild that with young people in particular.

There were interesting experiences around Black Lives Matters. And I mean, what came out of that, was some revaluing relationships and young people actually being able to identify and talk about micro aggressions. It felt like talking about racism was much more acceptable, and so it meant re-evaluating relationships with some friends and also adults in their lives, but equally, building connections and positively engaging with activism. There was a lot of intersectional impacts on poverty, about housing about digital exclusion and feeling treated as second class citizens. In terms of education, I think we really need to be thinking about the impact of this ongoing impact. As adults involved in child welfare, and certainly as an educator in higher education, I can see the impact each year continuing. But lots of stories about negative impacts on mental well-being and on education and ability to learn, the ability of parents to support education, the digital divide which is, you know, continuing – our world is increasingly digital. But for a lot of children and families, they just don't have the money to access the internet or the equipment that

others do. And it's just built in inequalities that are continuing through their education and relationships. It impacts on relationships, emotional well-being on multiple levels of trauma, and bereavement that again, I'm really wonder whether – well I don't think as a society we're acknowledging or responding to, within all communities, but certainly some of the levels of trauma, both here and abroad. You know, what it meant, like watching two weeks of television with sort of, the terrible, terrible trauma in India, just those stories, it's impacted on mental health. It's thinking through what are the longer term impacts and how can we support young people and particularly marginalised young people's education and mental health and well-being. I'm going to run out of time soon. So I'm going to just highlight basically, really problematic responses of over policing, disproportionately impacting young black men, you know, 13 year, 14 year old boys, boys being accused in handcuffs and in saying they feel discriminated against, as well as older young people, and that youth workers saying it's just normalised this is what people expect and we need to think about what that does to young people's sense of self, emotional well-being and ability to interact with people in authority and how they're going to feel and lack of trust. And we need to we need to be thinking through that. And taking some responsibility. I mention this very briefly, that Black Lives Matters, I really encourage young people to speak candidly about racial identity and belonging, and engaging. And there were real positives to that. And there were also the reevaluation of friendships. And I think naming, naming race and racism can be really important. For adults, for the parents, there were real, real difficulties. We call it parenting in a pandemic. But actually, a lot of these things were continuing, treated with suspicion under the hostile environment, questioned by GPs or receptionist every time we went to access NHS services, seen as less deserving in lots of different ways. And services not geared towards their needs. Fear of being stigmatized, judged as a bad parent, and then this one fear of a hostile response with no recourse to public funds. And I think we really need to challenge institutionalising poverty and destitution amongst children and families through the immigration system. It was recently I read last week, I think that the government was thinking of withdrawing meals for refugees or asylum seekers that are in hotels, you know, many of whom have children. And this woman said, she went and was told that they could take the children away. And her response was, are you insane? You know, why are you going to take my child away? And it is insane. It's completely insane. Yet, this is certainly what's happening, families been being threatened with by social work services, and we need to really think about the barriers as social workers. Oh, by the way there are the people who are involved in the work packages down below, the different universities.

So, I just think changing the future for children, young people and families, building trust and safe spaces. And really, this is the big message. I'm sorry, I missed out on the slide, I thought, or okay, there's one slide that's really important that I don't know where it went, but it's gone. And that was that what came through as the most important message was how community resources - this is really important - how community resources basically supported children and families. And the strongest message was whether it was a youth

club, a boxing group, a group for Bangladeshi women, a West African girls groups - these community resources that created safe spaces, but also, in some cases, absolutely met the material needs of the children and families. These were the most crucial to - for some families keeping them alive. So the boxing group that fed that Somali community in some of the cities, those were so important. And really the big, strongest message, really was that we need to create and keep these safe youth spaces and family support spaces. They need to be co-produced, engaged with communities. And they need to be seen as, in my view, particularly with youth and young people, a Public Health Service, to support their mental health and well-being. And the need for this to be run through participants accounts. And but we need to be thinking about sustainable funding and keeping these going to create a society where young people of all backgrounds can flourish.

Thank you.

Claire Burns:

Thanks Anna, just to say, you've only had 15 minutes, but such a powerful input and so many things that we'll want to come back to in there. So, I am going to move on now to John, Professor John McKendrick, John, over to you.

John McKendrick:

Great, you can all see the slides and here me fine?

Yep, good.

Lovely. Thank you very much. And many thanks for the invitation to share in the webinar this afternoon. Of course, as Claire has said it's Challenged Poverty Week. So, we reflect on the different ways in which poverty afflicts people in Scotland and what can be done to challenge it. And that a whole range of different interest groups this week, who are thinking through the relevance of poverty to their particular practice, and I am delighted that the CELCIS community are doing that. So much of what I say will reinforce what I'd said, but obviously, focusing more on the poverty. I'm going to start with a very big number, and a very big slide, because the current estimate, the best estimate we have is that a quarter of a million adult children are living in income poverty at the current time in Scotland. And significantly, two thirds of them are living in a household, where there is an adult in work. And I think that challenges a lot of the misconceptions that surround poverty in Scotland at the current time. I'm not going to overload you with numbers in with data, but I think some are really important. That big number gives us a sense of the scale of the problem. This is not a minority issue. This is an issue that afflicts far, far too many children and families in Scotland. And Anna had implored us to take an intersectional perspective, well, this isn't an intersectional perspective. But what it is, is an understanding that the risk of poverty is uneven across different population groups, largely in ways that wouldn't surprise us. I mean, we wouldn't be surprised to find that lone parent children and lone parent families are at higher risk of poverty, we wouldn't be

surprised to find that children in families where there are three or more children are at higher risk of poverty. They're almost logical reasons why that may be the case - unjust - but logical reasons why that may be the case. Certainly the benefit system and the two child cap has been an issue with regard to three children and more, and for lone parents the simple fact is that for many households today, you need two incomes to try and get by. And if you have one income, even if it's a good income, it very often it's not enough to flourish on indeed survive at the current time. But there is a group in here I think it does surprise me. And I think it's something that's really relevant to those that are involved in child protection. And that's the scale of the challenge that faces young mothers, something that I don't think we are as focused on, and the best evidence that we currently have is that more than half of children who are in a family with a mother who is aged under 25, are living in poverty at the current time. Now, that's not to say that the minute you get beyond 25, all your problems go away. But there is a particular risk rate for young mother and I think that's something that we should be much more attuned to than we have in the past. These six priority groups, just in case we don't know, I'll make no assumptions are the six priority groups that are particularly targeted by the Scottish Government, in its current action plan to eradicate child poverty by 2030. And to implore that local areas also have their own local plans to tackle child poverty. And I'll come back to that towards the end of the presentation. So how do families get by? Things are tough - that's undoubtedly the case. Well, families get by in this cost-of-living crisis in many ways in what you see in the chart in front of you are just 22 ways which I'm sure will be familiar to you. It may even be that you've had to use some of these strategies yourself too to manage over the course of the last year or so. Cutting back on what we previously had, prioritising spend, much more focused shopping, maybe using charity shops or cheaper products, delaying or doing without, foregoing quality, etc, etc, a whole range of ways in which strategies cope and have to adapt their everyday life in order to get by. These 22 strategies that you have in the board are not from 2023. They are over 20 years old, from a report that I published with a literature review back in 2003 for the then named Scottish Executive. And it's a point that Anna had made, the cost of living crisis is exacerbating and intensifying and perhaps extending the reach of the challenges that are currently being faced by many families in Scotland. But these problems aren't new. They've been about for a very, very long time, very often in the same communities over a long period. And some may argue within the same families across generations too. And in the harrowing circumstances, the coping strategies is maybe a positive element that we are finding strategies to get by and to minimise that risk, to protect your children and to as best we can bolster the family well-being. But they still are very tough ways of coping with a difficult situation. And just one extract from that report back in 2003. "My son's away at school today with sewn up trousers because I can't afford to buy him a new pair of trousers at the moment, because he's wrecked all the other ones." And "My trainers are filthy because my daughter had them on. The ones she usually wears were wet, so she couldn't wear them, so she had to wear mine." And that's horrific. I mean it is 2001. But and it is unfortunately a big but, the types of experiences that we covered in 2001 are

also the types of experiences that we have heard about in the last year, the realities of the situations that families face, and the experiences of those who support families must encounter. So, these two quotes are not from 2001, but they are very similar to that one of 20 years ago. They reflect the situation at the current time in the here and now. And I'm going to be doing both quotes to emphasise the points.

"A wee guy in particular who would go into school in the morning because they'll give him his lunch. And by the time he's got to us (this is out of school project), which is at 10 o'clock he has eaten his lunch because he gets no breakfast and he's absolutely starving by the time he gets here. And so his ability to focus is minimal. We actually started a Breakfast Club. We've got boys trying to steal loaves of bread and stuff from the Breakfast Club because it goes home to feed their four wee brothers that all live in the one house, you know. Their level of poverty is unbelievable."

Second quote: "Could we do more? Absolutely, we could do loads more. I would love to see a lounge opened up continually just churn out food for people. Because food insecurity is probably the biggest issue. Malnutrition is one of the biggest issues."

We're talking about very basic needs here. We're talking about not being able to feed ourselves at the current time in 2023. And significantly, these two quotes come from community football trusts, not from social services, but from organisations that exist to add a little quality, to provide a little bit of opportunity and people's lives. But increasingly what they're faced to do is faced to meet basic needs, basic needs to ensure people's survival and existence in 2023. And these are not exceptional quotes. These are illustrative quotes of the reality for many local organisations.

That was qualitative evidence and sometimes we can criticise qualitative evidence because we think it is rather selective. Here to compliment or some thoughts from teachers of home economics. Because earlier this year we were asked to do a survey of home economics teachers across the UK, or food education as it's known south of the border, to find out their experiences of, Home Economics education in general, but in particular, to think about its relevance and pertinence in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis. And just a couple of stats from what's a very large report, and I am happy to make it available if you're interested, three fifths of home economics teachers across the UK were saying that more of the children are eating the food immediately having produced it in class, and 1/3 of home economics teachers were of the opinion that more children were actually appearing hungry in class at the current time. So, the point making by way of introduction is that poverty is a large problem that afflicts many of our young people and families. And it's been particularly intensified in the last year with our cost-of-living crisis. Perhaps the reach extended but the intensification of poverty for those experiencing it is, I think, a critical point and people must be protected. People must get by as best they can. And I think my opinion would be the what has really happened is what we've had over the course the last year in particular, and perhaps over a longer period, is basically an extension of the Child Protection ecosystem, that the range of organisations that are now involved in meeting children's basic needs is far, far greater than it was beforehand. Now

I know Anna was critical of policing, and rightly so, drawing our attention to the way in which that the practice of policing very often victimises particular populations. But I've also had conversations up here with policing in Police Scotland, who are keen to emphasise that increasingly, they're taking a public health approach to policing. Now, they very much are looking at the experience in the round, not just a criminal justice perspective, but trying to understand the circumstances which lead people to behave in particular ways. And I think that's a significant shift in mindset, in terms of how we approach our policing work, with the possibility of a whole range of different strategies been implicated as a result. I mentioned football trusts. So, community football projects are not there to provide basic needs. But increasingly, that's what they have to do over the last few years. They've had to layer their projects with a food offer, to make sure then that people are fed as well as provided for in terms of opportunity, or adding a little bit of quality to life. And again, we've seen it in schools. Increasingly now, without even problematizing the idea, we see schools are extending the wraparound provision of food, increasingly providing breakfast in the morning, as well as providing that food often at lunchtime, universal provision in primary schools, and selective provision for those most in need in secondary schools. And there are even some examples out there of the provision of food in schools after the school day. Let me just refer to one example. There is a small charity in Glasgow called Launch Foods. Launch Foods is our social enterprise runs a cafe down in the centre of Glasgow with the funds from that café being ploughed back into other provisions. Launch Foods visit five primary schools in Glasgow once a week, on a rotational basis. And they provide a hot meal at the end of the school day for every child within that school, and very often for the families of those children as well. This is a reality of where some of our poorest communities in Scotland are at the current time. The child protection issue that comes by not meeting basic needs, is having to be met by a much broader range of agencies than previously would be the case. And while I think there's a positive in that, and that understanding people's lives and their own, there's something they want to encourage, I think this isn't the context in which we can truly realise those benefits because the idea of a wraparound provision or understanding that the holistic needs of a family is the right approach to take. But you can't get a true benefit of that, if you're focusing attention on meeting the basic needs that otherwise could put that family and individuals in perilous circumstances. So, we're not getting the benefits. I think of these holistic interventions that in better times, I think, could really properly enhanced quality of life of people, families and children. And it's not just a case of we are not getting the full benefit from that shift in mindset and thinking, I think we also have to acknowledge that increasingly, these third sector providers are under strain. And we know our local government are under strain as well. But I think that the perilous circumstances that some of these organisations find themselves in, and the stress that's experienced by individuals working within these organisations, I think, is something we have to acknowledge as well. And this quotation here, again, is from our community football organisation that is saying we now have to really think about what we're doing. We used to say yes to everything. But we can't sustain that. Now, we have to think about how can

we have the biggest impact, rather than trying to meet every single demand that comes our way. I have also talked to financial inclusion service providers in one of our Scottish cities. And they've one of the organisations involved in that business has said that they are now having weekly meetings with staff so that staff can debrief and can de-stress themselves, to unburden themselves of some of the horrific circumstances in their having to encounter in terms of supporting the very most vulnerable families. So this ecosystem is under strain. And I think that we should acknowledge that to the current time. But what does it mean? If things are tougher, then I think there are different outcomes that could respond from that. And I don't want to discuss this in depth, but just basically to flag it up and if you so desire to pick it up in the discussion, that the cost-of-living crisis maybe extending its reach beyond the very most economically vulnerable in society can land in different ways. It can lead to greater solidarity, you know, we can understand that actually things I understand that tough situation that somebody else faces, because my situation is a little bit tougher today. That's one possible outcome of it. But that solidarity can be ephemeral. And we can think of, for example, the clap for nurses during the pandemic where we opened our doors every Thursday night and we clapped for nurses, but you know, we don't do it all the time, we have kind of forgotten about that. Solidarity sometimes can last for the very short period, and not necessarily in ways with substance. But it doesn't just mean that we'll have solidarity because everybody understands things that are a little bit tougher. What has happened in the past and different historical periods, and we might even see some evidence of it today is it can lead to emergent or deeper divisions that were already there. Blaming somebody else for the situation the country finds itself in is a very convenient situation. So I don't think automatically, we will be a community of greater solidarity, by the fact that we're all going through a cost-of-living crisis, there is a real risk there of what it can do, it can fracture us and can make that sense of collective weaker than previously was the case. I just want to leave you with one food for thought, again, that we might want to take off. And let me let me preface this by saying that I am strongly supportive of the approach that's going on in Scotland and appreciative of the range of actions that have been undertaken, both by Scottish Government, local government and by local partners, third sector, private sector, as well, it has to be said, as well as community and public bodies, such as Public Health Scotland, very appreciative of the range of what is going on to tackle poverty in Scotland. But I think we also, with regard to child protection have to be cautious, slightly about direction and what that might mean for child protection. So as I said, we have this programme in place to eradicate, or at least to, you know, significantly dent the extent of child poverty by 2030. This may be a familiar chart to many of you, which is the driver diagram, which is aimed at the local actions are intended to make a difference locally to reduce the number of people living in poverty. And the aim of that with the national actions in the local actions, is to reduce the overall number or number of people living in poverty at the current time. My issue with that, and as I say, I'm strongly supportive, I have to emphasise, I'm strongly supportive, but we measure it by interim measures and end measures. And the focus then tends to be quite rightly, understandably, on reducing the

number of people who are living in poverty. But that does present a risk of all our attention is sharply focused on getting that number down, at the expense of other ways in which we can make a difference in terms of tackling poverty, if we think about it with regard to some of the families that are within the child protection system, with the best will in the world it is very difficult through intervention to remove these families with poverty, unless we're using very blunt tools in terms of significantly ratcheting up social security, for many of the families in the child protection system. Much of what we do in terms of anti-poverty interventions, and about enabling them to have a better quality of life in the future or protecting them from the very worst excesses of poverty, they are not necessarily about reducing the number of poverty in the here and now. It's about providing that stability. It's about moving people closer to a point in the future where they may be able to leave poverty. And it's about enabling progress towards what they're able to achieve. And the risk could be of course, that if we're only focused on, if you look at the very the top two charts there, focusing on reducing the number of people living in poverty, or indeed, reducing people on the margins of poverty from falling into poverty. The first two examples there. We are not capturing everybody that is vulnerable. And it's just a cautious word. I am not saying this is a wrong approach. But we have to make sure that our very most vulnerable citizens who are further away from being able to make a positive contribution to these targets aren't forgotten in this admirable national quest to eradicate child poverty. So just a couple of food for thoughts there to take forward when we come to discussion, but thanks very much for allowing me to, to share my thoughts.

Claire Burns:

Thanks, John. And again, such a such a powerful input and the fact are actually talking for themselves as well. So we'll come back. There is applause coming through in the chat function I see. I am going to hand over now to Lisa. Thanks Lisa.

Lisa Bunting:

Good afternoon everyone. It's a pleasure to be here. And thank you very much to CELCIS for the invite. What I'm going to be focusing on as I'm beaming in from not so sunny Northern Ireland at the minute is the changing relationship between area level deprivation, and children who are involved in the child protection system in Northern Ireland. Now, and this fits very well with what Anna and John have already been talking about. Anna has very eloquently highlighted the issue around poverty and intersectionality and race. John has been talking about very broadly about the experiences of families and the very basic needs that aren't actually being met. And the various strategies and ways that we're having to intervene with families and provide much more in the way of support within communities to try and address some of those things. So in keeping with that, I am going to focus very much here on children and families who are in contact and with Child and Family Social Work and relation to children who need child protection and looked after, and thinking about the relationship this has with area level deprivation, and what that potentially means for us in terms of social work practice. So just to say where this

comes from, this is an ESRC funded project. And it is overseen and run by the ADRC, Research Centre, Administrative Data Research Centre, some of you may be aware of this, and it's a UK network of universities, government departments, agencies, etc. And the basic aim of this is to try to make the best use of the available data that we already routinely collect, either through analysis of single datasets, or through data linkage to maximise the information we have. And this is in terms of social work is a subject, it's obviously one that's sometimes very boring to people. But, it's close to my heart because we collect a massive amount of information and how do we use that? How do we make best use of that, to guide what our needs understand the needs of the families that we work with, think about things like workforce, and where we need to develop certain areas. Even basic information sometimes about the types and the nature of the families that we're in contact with, and that we're removing children from their care. So the basic aim of this element of the project that I'm working on currently is to examine the changing relationship between disadvantage and child welfare interventions in Northern Ireland. So as I've said, what we're meaning by child welfare interventions is those families who are referred, and were the children who referred to social services, and they may just be taken as a family support case, as a child in need, they may become subject to child protection registration, which would be the equivalent in other UK jurisdictions of being placed on Child Protection Plan, or they may become looked after. And what we mean by inequality in relation to this is that they have systematically unequal chances of coming into contact, and particularly experiencing the higher more statutory end of intervention on the basis of area level deprivation. Now, Anna has already mentioned this, but this really stems from the work of Paul Bywaters and the Child Welfare Inequalities Project. I had the privilege of being involved in that project. And I lead on the Northern Ireland aspect of that. And what we found and what Paul was really keen to do was that we understand entirely how there is a social gradient, when it comes to health, the risk of mortality, heart attacks, diabetes, etc, is socially graded. What we're trying to do with that project was to really quantify and prove probably for one of the first time certainly within the UK, that this gradient is present also when it comes to child welfare interventions. I think as practitioners, we all instinctively understand that. But what we wanted to do was really highlight that and as a way of provoking conversation and a focus on this issue, because it's one of the things we often talk about, we know it so well have almost forgotten about it, it's the wallpaper of practice, we expect to go into a poorer area, we expect to have higher numbers. And in some sense, there's maybe an aspect of that where we have forgotten about what that actually might mean and what we might be able to do to try and change that. So in terms of that project, what we found was a clear social gradient across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, there's a graph up there of our rates for child protection plans and looked after children by decile in Northern Ireland, we found that if you lived in the poorest area, you were six times more likely to be placed on the register, and four times more likely to become looked after. And also where that relationship held across all aspects of the UK, the relationship was a lot less strong in Northern Ireland at that particular time than it was in England, where you might

have been at 10 times the risk of being placed on the register or becoming looked after. And that's always been very interesting to me about, you know, why that might be and actually was that reflective of trends over time. Certainly since that project, there has been a lot more interest. And that's been one of the really positive things about it, that it's generated a huge amount of interest around the relationship between poverty and deprivation and child welfare interventions. And increasingly, there's been longitudinal research in England and Wales which have been showing that actually inequality has been increasing over time, particularly with respect to looked after children. So what we wanted to do is have a look at this specifically in Northern Ireland. So, our social services recording platform is called SOSCARE. We have records dating back to 1985. But we were focus on a more current time period 2010-2021. And we accessed that service through the honest broker service and all the data is analysed anonymously in a secure environment. And what we did was link the postcode of the family of origin at the time of referral with super output area. And these are just small areas of geography and Northern Ireland, there's 890 of them with an average population of 2000 people, then once we've identified that, they were able to convert that to deprivation decile, based on Northern Ireland's Multiple Deprivation indicators. So number 1 one is the most deprived and the 890 super output area is the least deprived. And as in other geographies, or jurisdictions, that's been set up to broadly represents 10% of the child population of the overall population within each of those deciles. So, what we're looking at, is trying to identify the number of children who are subjected to different levels of intervention across different years. Unfortunately, the data is an imperfect thing. And we have moved and using different platforms over time. So, the availability of Northern Northern Ireland wide data varies depending on what type of intervention we're looking at. So we were able to look at referrals, child protection investigations, and registrations from 2010 to 2017. And for looked after children for 2010 to 2020. Bearing in mind, we're talking about COVID-19 here, and obviously, this data predates COVID-19. But I think what it does is highlight significant problems, again, based on what John and Anna said that we know, have got significantly worse. COVID-19 didn't create the inequalities, but it has certainly widened them considerably. So to try and look at this, we produce various different measures of inequality, both absolute and relative. And I'm going to focus more here on the ratio of the top and the bottom, as well as the relative index inequality. I'm not going to bore you with the details of how those are calculated. The information is there for you to have a look at. And there's some further detail and appendices as well, that will be available to you afterwards.

And like I say, again, there are various limitations, you know, with the data quality, some trusts (we're five trusts in Northern Ireland) have moved to using PARIS, and everybody is now moving to and ENCOMPASS which is going to be all singing, all dancing and do things that have never been seen or done before. I'd be highly surprised if that is the case. But it poses problems. It's kind of heartbreaking actually, as somebody who really wants to keep the stuff up to date. But we have been able to look at data in relation to

looked after children up until 2020. Though we should bear in mind that one trust isn't available within that from 2018 on. And in terms of trying to match up the data with what we have from official returns, broadly within five to 10%. of what we see in our departmental returns that are produced annually. And there are various reasons for that, obviously, migration to different platforms. But also changes to recording practices means that there's just this inherent variation, but everything is following the same patterns, as we would anticipate. And that's what 12 years of child protection and children's social work looks like in Northern Ireland. They are fairly similar patterns, I would imagine to what you would see across the rest of the UK, and Northern Ireland, I think uniquely has probably the highest number of referrals across the UK. And that has remained consistently so over time. We've had increasing patterns of referral, up to 2004. We then had a bit of a downward trend. But as you can see in that blue line there, it's starting to spike back up again. And our child protection investigations have remained relatively steady with a bit of a downward trend, but again, starting to chart back up again. And we have had a kind of slow (it's not possibly terribly visible from that graph) but slight increase. in the number of Child Protection registrations and increasing looked after rates at the 31st of March, though our annual admission rates have declined slightly. So that's a feature of children being in care longer, as opposed to more children coming into care. So that's the broad picture in terms of where we stand in Northern Ireland. So, if I shift into the first of our findings, and here I'm looking at the relative ratio of inequality and In relation to 2010 to 2017. And this is a measure of based on, it is really quite a crude measure, but it's very easily understood by everybody. It's by dividing the top - the most deprived - by the least deprived and terms of rates. So we focus on referrals, what we see over time - the blue line - is a fairly flat line. So children in the most deprived areas are four to five times more likely to be referred to children's social care than those in the least deprived. And that has stayed relatively steady over time. So all things being equal, you might expect everything else to be relatively flat, except that it's not. So children investigated in 2010, that's the orange line, were three times more likely to come from the most deprived areas that had risen to six times more likely in 2017. Children registered were four times more likely in 2010, to come from the most deprived area. That had doubled to a rate of eight by 2017. And for looked after children, the yellow line, there probably looks a bit sharper increase there, they are 4 to 4.5 times more likely, in 2010, rising to 8.4 times more likely to come from the most deprived areas compared to the least, in 2017. So very clear patterns of rising inequality, regardless of that very flat referral, there is inequality and referrals, but it's not changing. The other stuff is changing and widening over time. And if we look at the relative index in inequality, and this is a slightly stronger measure, in terms of it uses regression analysis to take account of the people in all the other deciles. So, in some ways, it's a better and a stronger indicator. And again, we can see this pattern so relative to stability, if not a decline in terms of referrals. And but in investigations, we see that rising pattern and and here they're presented as proportions above the average. So for investigations, the numbers from the most deprived area where 59% higher than the Northern Ireland average in 2010, that

had risen to 76% in 2017, registrations that was 76%, higher than the Northern Ireland average and that rose to 89% in 2017. And again, that same pattern for looked after children 73% in 2010, and 96%, and 2017. So again, across, the measures, you have a bit more fluctuation with registration, but across different measures, and that's just strengthening our understanding that this is a very clear pattern. And then when we look at the data that we had just purely for looked after children, which we can take up to 2020, up to slightly more recent, again, we see this pattern just continuing. So that's the relative ratio and the relative index of inequality. So it's 4.5 times higher than the 2010. And in 2020, if you lived in the most deprived areas, you were nine times more likely to have a child coming into care. And equally with the relative index of inequality, it was 72%, above the average, for the most deprived areas in 2010. It was 100% above the average, and 2020. So nothing has happened in those intervening couple of years, that has changed that pattern. And I would strongly suggest that nothing has changed since then. If anything, I would expect it to have gotten considerably worse. We also looked at trends in relation to gender and age, there was very little difference between males and females in terms of measuring inequality. The rates did tend to be slightly higher for females just at all levels. But what our data also showed was that the increases were largely being driven by increased contact of children in the 0-4 age group from the poorer areas. So you can see that in that graph there. And that's the blue line is the 0-4s. All the other age groups 5-9, 10-14, 15-19, they remain relatively stable and you can just see how that increases upwards. It kind of maintains – it dips slightly - but there's still a significant difference. So, what we're seeing is that was looked after children but that was also evident in terms of referrals and registrations. So increasingly that is where the group of that is coming into contact with Child and Family social worker is coming from. So, what does this all mean? I mean, the key points, just bearing in mind no that no data is perfect. So, obviously the availability of more recent data is hugely important to us. And that's something we're working on. There are limitations with the use of the family of origin postcode. It's one point in time doesn't account for those changes. And also being aware that deprivation is it's an area measure. It's a blunt tool. But it does, increasingly through lots of different projects, show that clear relationship as well as individual income measures. So what can we say we see a very clear, increasing social gradient in child welfare interventions, particularly at the highest levels of intervention. And this mirrors findings that we see in England and Wales which are showing us that it's not just simply a function of wider system trends. Particularly when we see that holding stable at referral level. And then the other levels of intervention. We've also seen in other English and Welsh research, that the increases in numbers and the widening inequality of looked after children that is evident is also been driven by increases in children in the 0-4 age group coming into care from the most deprived areas. And also, records work has also demonstrated that in England as well, and I think Davara Lee Bennett's work is really, really important here, she's done some amazing work, I would recommend reading that she has been able to link in with local area, poverty rates, changes to unemployment, and actually really develop a much more causal model of what is driving these changes. We

haven't been able to do that here in Northern Ireland, we don't have access to that level of data, to do that kind of analysis. But we would strongly suspect that that is also what is driving our rates here. And that increasing inequality, as John has pointed out, you know, the families that are targeted, when we see the people that have been hit by cost of living, and also the cuts in welfare reform and Social Security, they tend to be single parent families, younger families, families with a parent with a disability, or with children with a disability. And those are all the core groups that are in contact with Child and Family social work.

So what does this mean for policy and practice? In Northern Ireland, like many parts of the UK, we're having a significant social work crisis, we have rising referrals, rising need, foster carers gaps, workforce issues, huge problems with retention. And so on the back of that Professor Ray Jones was commissioned to do an independent review of children's services. Now, he has published that report, and he has made any number of recommendations, some about structural change some about team balance and how we provide family support within a more multidisciplinary child protection and family support system. And those are all very welcome. We did meet with Ray and did present these findings. And we're really pleased that the report itself does really recognise the link with poverty and deprivation. And it's made a number of specific recommendations in relation to benefits and Social Security. So, those are some positive things, obviously, the big ticket things - how and when, given our current and habitual lack of an assembly, how and when they become implemented is to be seen. But yeah, I would hope that we're going to move in a slightly different direction. But thinking about the research and what we think it potentially means for policy practice, obviously, this was a recommendation we made back when we launched Child Welfare inequalities, which we haven't had huge success in Northern Ireland with is that we would like routinely to see this as part of the annual returns, that the Department of Health produces just to make sure that we maintain that focus on poverty and inequality, and also that we're clear that we know whose families are we intervening with? Where are they from? Why we do still not do not have a great picture of it at a national level. But also, more importantly, for me as well, I think at a practice level, what we've done in this analysis, everybody who works in an in a trust, or a local authority has the facility to make those kinds of links that we have done. And actually some trusts have started to do that. And what we're saying is this is a way to try and understand who is the population, how you're serving the needs of that population. And it's a way to start having discussions between team leaders and managers and practitioners about what is happening here. What is the conversation, why does this variation exist? Why does this very deprived area have this very high rate of looked after but this equally deprived area doesn't? What is different family support services, practice, attitudes? And even trying to think of this from an individual, because there's no easy solutions? I mean, as John has pointed out, that facility have an individual practitioner to really meaningfully change? What might be a community level issue or a broader social issue? You know, whether there's limits to that. But even just to think

about how do we take an account of this in assessment? How are we thinking about the actual access to material resources? And is there a way we can pick this up in supervision to really think about what the needs of that group are, and what the spread of services we might need to support them. And interestingly, Belfast Trust is currently doing a lot of work around this, I'm going to be meeting with them soon to hear a bit of an update and thinking about, really drilling down into different patches and how they link with family support networks, and things like that to try and get underneath the big numbers that I've talked about, and see what it means for them at a local level. So I think there were there are positives to that. But as Anna and John have highlighted, there is a hell of a lot to do. That's everything from me. Thank you.

Claire Burns:

Brilliant Lisa. I appreciate the amount of information you've given us there in quite a short period of time. I'm going to move to questions now, because we're getting lots of questions coming through from people and Anna I'm hoping that you're going to get a chance to come back to what you wanted to say in response to some of those questions. So again, thanks, John, Anna, and Lisa - all really stimulating and lots of food for thought. So I'm just going to start off with a few questions. And then we'll take questions from the floor. There is so much that I can ask you from what we have just seen, so much we need to do. But I want to start on that question around How do we- I find even, myself, over the years we can tie ourselves in knots at times trying to describe this connection between poverty and inequality and coming to the attention of services. Even personally, people have said to me, you know, well, you're stigmatising and poor people. And so, I think there's times when that connection becomes quite difficult. I wonder again, maybe Lisa, start with you. And then come John and Anna: how can we be more confident in showing and describing the link between poverty and increased chances of children being in need of care and protection in a way that feels like it's embedded in the data as you're saying, but does it feel stigmatising? So, we usually start off with quite an easy question. Lisa, we are going straight to the esoteris here, so apologies. But I think even you were saying you are more likely to be involved with Child Welfare Services, it's part of the wallpaper of practice. But, even recently we've got into some of these debates about how we show this connection in a non-stigmatising way. So I wonder if you just wanted to see a bit more around that. And then we'll go to John and Anna,

Lisa Bunting:

Thank you for landing me with a question about causality. Yeah, chicken and egg. It is difficult, because we're not good at understanding risk and explaining risk as human beings. So I'm a smoker. I know what my risks are. But they're not inevitable. And just because I happened to be in this group doesn't mean that I will end up here and that is exactly the same. So we're not saying that everybody who's poor... And it's how we give that message is difficult, but it exists in many walks of life in terms of public health

approaches. It's not everybody in that area, there are plenty of people. And clearly I think especially with Child Protection, there are always additional needs. The extent to which of the issues around poverty and material, I mean that debate about chicken and egg has been around for a very long time, because we know the circumstances of poor mental health etc, that are contribute to poverty, and the poverty also contributes. So, the two are interlinked. I think increasingly we can see the evidence for causality - that actually making material changes, improving people's life circumstances actually reduces the numbers in contact with social services where they will be more confident in that argument. But to get past being a geek out by that as well I always remember Sean Holland, he used to be the chief social worker for Northern Ireland, said causality, that's for academics, it doesn't matter. What we know is it doesn't make anything better. And that's the main focus is reducing that as opposed to getting caught into what causes what.

Claire Burns:

Really helpful, Lisa. Anna, I'm gonna come to you next and then to John on that.

Anna Gupta:

Yeah, I agree with what Lisa said, I think the fact that people are worried about stigma have held the debate around poverty in the child protection system amongst practitioners, policymakers for a number of years. It's a real sticking point. My view is we take a structural perspective on understanding poverty, it's about actual structural and systemic issues, it's about in poverty making parenting much harder. You know, if I want to drink, I can go pay for someone to look after my kids and go out to a restaurant and have a glass of wine. And people in poverty can't do that. It makes life choices much more difficult. I think if you look at Amartya Sen's work on the capability approach, he's very clear. You know, poverty is a capability deprivator, it deprives us of choices, and the opportunities to live the life we want to. And if we take that broader view, we're not stigmatising individuals, we're saying, this is the context of your life and it's hard. And how as professionals can we make that a bit better? And what are you doing positively in that? So also recognising resistance and ways of challenging poverty? But I think we need to... it's a real challenge to get over that stigma. And if we take a much more structural perspective, it's one way of doing that.

Claire Burns:

Thanks, Anna. Because I think my worry is we get caught in the argument rather than doing something. John, anything you want to add?

John McKendrick:

Yeah, I mean, very much the idea of how we approach a person and a service regarding eligibility round about poverty is a real big live issue and has been in for a long, long time, you have got a contemporary window, that it's easy to talk about people that are suffering economic disadvantage, because we can talk about cost-of-living rather than poverty. So

there is a gentle way at the current time because that's something that seemed to impact everybody. But there are longer term issues we have to face up to. It very often can lead into a debate about whether we present our service in a universal over in a targeted way, you know, it can be as fundamental as that - in order to avoid stigma, we make everybody entitled to the service. If we do that, there's a cost implication. And if we do that, there's always a risk of the inverse care law, that those that need the least are those that get the most, because they are better able to work the system. So, we want to think carefully about the balance between universal and targeted, and I think increasingly in tough fiscal climates, there is a belief then that all intervention should be targeted rather than universal. Universal provisions come under pressure in these times. I think the other key thing to bear in mind is what is really important is the "how to", you know, how it is delivered rather than what's delivered and who gets it. How you interact with somebody in need is absolutely critical to how that's received. It's not what you're providing very often. So you talked about at the start, Claire, it is about personal issues, there's mental health and well-being issues, and I can give you one concrete example, if we go back to the Launch Foods example. Now, Launch Foods doesn't present itself as providing a food service for poor families, Launch Foods presents itself as you're doing your bit for the environment, because this food is going to waste otherwise. And it so happens that by taking this food that you're doing as a favour and you're doing the planet a favour. And that way of thinking also underlies many of the uniform exchange schemes - they are presented as environmental initiatives rather than food initiatives. So, I think there's a number of things we've got to be thinking through, I think the how we deliver is the most important. There are subtle ways in which we can present that emphasise something else rather than the giving to the material need. And that sensitivity to the universal versus targeted is going to be a sharper debate in the years ahead. When there's more pressure on pounds and pence and budgets.

Claire Burns:

Thanks, John. I think this is what we have been hearing all the time already. We have just come from two days at the Social Work Scotland Conference and that's been some of the debate as well. I suppose it's really helpful to think about that connection. But, so what is the most important thing that John, you are referring about? We represent a lot, we represent social work, education, health services. And this is a big question again, it is about saying what do we need to do with those services so that it feels less stigmatising. Anna, you talked a lot about how can we rebuild the confidence of communities so that actually they can get a response that's non stigmatising from, for example, statutory services, but also what we're hearing from families and your hearing, is that local community based support is actually what feels most impactful to being less stigmatising and I suspect there's something that we want our statutory services to do differently. But there's also hearing from families about what is the kind of support that feels most comfortable from them? So, I suppose a two pronged question: what would you be asking statutory services to do differently? But how do we also support those localised services

that I think families feel most comfortable with. I was really struck, John, I think you talked about the boxing club that becomes the container for some families. So, Anna, can we start with you, and then we can go to John and Lisa.

Anna Gupta:

Okay. I think statutory services need to engage with their communities more, we need to be talking. So like, I mean, I can talk much better about children's services. But you know, thinking of you in the child protection system in the family court systems, to involve parents to involve young people in the delivery of services and thinking about why they aren't trusted. To try and hear voices, I think with community services, they need sustained funding. They need to, they need again, to have sort of co-production people to have a say over what helps them and what they want to see and what helps them. I think the risk the individualised risk models in child protection - and I can talk more confidently about England, makes it a very stigmatising lack of trust service that people don't trust. They feel that any families feel that any need is going to be seen within the prism of risks. So, I think we need to also really tackle that Risk/Need. Divide really.

Claire Burns:

Thanks Anna, I think that really clear things in terms of what statutory services need to do. And I think it links that point that you made about really listening to what families are saying is the most helpful kind of support. John, did you want a follow up there?

John McKendrick:

Just a couple more points. I think, undoubtedly, the case in the anti-poverty sector is listening to lived-experience, or even better co-production is something that's now becoming almost routine. I mean, I sit on the National Partners Group and we provide support to the 32 local authorities in Scotland as they are devising their local Child Poverty Action reports. And one thing we are keenly focused on is that sense of active contribution to these reports from people experiencing poverty. Now, I'm not going to pretend it's perfect, because it absolutely is not. That there is that assumption that that's the best way to go about things. And I think increasingly services listen to lived-experience, or as I say, preferably, lived-experience is involved in crafting together that service to make sure that it's going to land well. The other point about what should be done? Well, the fact that that child protection ecosystem is broadening out means that there are more people involved in offering intervention, soft intervention food, for example, than may have been the case previously. And that does mean that we need to help these people to understand the powerful role that they've got, and that the "How" is as important as the "What" they're providing. And maybe that's leading to things such as, and I'll give a plug for something I'm doing here, if you don't mind. This isn't what I'm doing, the plug comes later. Falkirk Council, for example, have got think poverty sessions, where they bring together their staff and they train their staff in poverty sensitive training, so that they just can think through what it might mean to deliver the service in a

different way, or how the service that they provide may be received by groups that are economically disadvantaged. And the point I made a bit the plug for, for something that I'm involved in. We are developing a local poverty directory, we are likely to launch it in the very end of October. And that then is looking at local examples of working with our most vulnerable families and citizens to have a whole range of different local actions that are involved in tackling poverty. And again, one of the things that we are really interested in, is whether co-production features in these local initiatives, the extent to which there is active participation of those with lived-experience a poverty. I'm not saying it's easy. I'm not saying it's always correct, that people with lived-experience are involved. But I think most times it is and in the very least, we should always be considering is there a role for active participation as I design my service, as I evaluate my service. At the very least we should be asking the questions.

Claire Burns:

That's great, John, thanks very much. And just keeping in mind as well, what Anna is saying around having to work hard around the inclusion of really marginalised voices as well. Lisa, did you want to want to come in?

Lisa Bunting:

Yeah, just to say that the idea of community responses and better links into community services, I mean, because inevitably, when I when I look at the numbers, this cannot be done by social work alone, and nor should it be expected to be done by social work alone, I think putting that on practitioners is just too much of a weight for anybody. We're just setting people up to fail in that respect. So how do we build those links? I'd like to see, when we talk about co-production as well, I would like to see much more involvement of frontline practitioners and so often this comes from on high on the people who actually have to do this job and want and have a vision often themselves of what they would like to be doing and I'm sure you've heard this as educators, you know - social work wasn't what they thought it was going to be. And those small pockets where they get to do a bit of work where they really feel like they're being a social worker, again, and not a social police officer, are really important. How do we manage? So many things are needed to do that, you know, time, reflection, what do they want? I think some of the stuff that we've seen in our review in Northern Ireland, social work, Child Protection remains very much a social work specific occupation. Even though we liaise with other people, the teams are themselves almost purely social work. So how do we expand those to bring in other people that can work more preventatively as well. The risk need and support paradigm, I mean if I had an answer to that one, I'd be on a yacht somewhere probably, because I think it's always going to be there. I mean, Ray (Jones) said he wants to move from a child protection system to a family support system. I don't think we can do that without listening to communities, without listening to Social Work practitioners themselves and rely on them to do some of that preventative work. I think my fear purely from social work, discipline and practice is that all the preventative stuff gets hived off somewhere

else. And social work gets left with just the really hard end without any of the facility to do the relationship building. So I don't know if that's an answer. It was it was kind of rambling, but lots of things.

Claire Burns:

I think it's important that we talk about what we don't want to see happen and stuff like that dichotomy that you're talking about what becomes the role of statutory services. And what becomes the role of community services or universal services is really important. So, and just keeping on that subject. Because I think what you are also raising is that there has to be hope and we have to believe that if we do things differently, we can, we can make an impact on families. Is there anything that came out of - we talk a lot about innovation during COVID-19, and things that happened in COVID-19 - is there anything that actually we really want to grasp onto and see if we could do a bit more of this? So we did a bit of work with two local authorities who actually made direct payments to families. With one of them there was still a bit of a criteria that had to be met, but on another they just said this money is coming in from Scottish Government, It's going straight to straight to families. And they were saying, there were so few issues. People were really concerned about what the money would get spent on. And as far as they could see there were so few concerns about that. So, I suppose is there anything that you've been hearing about during COVID-19 or post COVID-19 that make you think that is what they should be doing? And how do we advocate for those approaches, which are just about improving the material conditions for families, as an intervention and an approach in themselves? Lisa, I think I'll give you a break on that one at the moment, and give you a bit of time. So, Anna, can we come back to you and John, and then we'll come back round to Lisa?

John, do you want to go first? I'm just thinking,

John McKendrick:

I am trying to think of some concrete examples as well. I think that Cash First, that particularly came out of school meals. For the school meals, it was understood that we can't deliver school meals, what else are we going to do? There were some authorities that provided the food, and they didn't do it because it didn't trust people, very often it was they were thinking in terms of quality of provision. There was also some very poor provision of foods. And, if I think of an anecdote, I live in a small village, the local provision, or the point of food collection was in a town next to the people from my village and with the best well in the world, those are in my village are not going to walk to the next town during a time of COVID-19 to pick up that food. So, there's a lot of bad practice in the early days. But then as you say the Cash First came in as a preferred approach. And I think that ethos of Cash First, ideally is the right approach and the Scottish Government has produced a paper where Cash First is an alternative in terms of food security issues. That is that understanding that where that is possible Cash First should be a preferred form of intervention rather than in kind. So that's something I think that

maybe wasn't a new idea, but it was something during COVID-19, it was tested and proven, actually to work okay, and therefore there are signs of it carrying forward. But there are other examples as well. I did some work for the Scottish Government in terms of looking at the four local authorities, actually in four local authority areas we were talking to lots of significant leaders of organisations within those four local authorities to find out how they pivoted, and how they changed their models of service delivery during COVID-19. Not just Cash First. But I think the big thing that struck me was that trust was something that was more important. And it was forced trust. You had to trust your third sector partners to work with you and they were better at delivering in the community. And there was a lot of letting go. And a lot of scaling back on admin and bureaucracy during COVID-19 as well. Now, unfortunately, I think there's been a little bit of rolling back and there's a little bit of taking back control and a little bit more bureaucracy has crept back in, but I think it's useful for us to reflect on how that was useful learning, it was effective practice, and why have we gone back to that bean counting and lack of trust when we're working. And the final example would probably be financial inclusion. Again, it wasn't a new idea. But to provide financial inclusion advice during COVID-19, you know, it had to be done using technology, it wasn't just face to face. Very often those that are in the most perilous, desperate circumstances need face to face, either because of literacy skills, social skills, or access measures. So, I'm not saying this should replace face to face. But it was a layering of provision, which meant there were efficiencies and economies of scale. And in some cases, the geographical reach was improved, because while for some people face to face is necessary it's not always convenient for all populations. Those who are less mobile, those who are more rural. So, there were lots of learnings during COVID-19, in terms of how we delivered our services, some of which we've carried forward, but some of which I think we've quickly forgotten the lessons already.

Thanks, John. Anna?

Anna Gupta:

I think, certainly from the work I've done, the mutual aid and the relationships and communities from the young people, interestingly, what they said, around the sort of community groups and the sports groups, was people cared, people kept in contact. And it wasn't necessarily the statutory services again, although some did, some talked about teachers, a few that talked about teachers, but that sense of, you're in our mind, and we, we are wanting to know how you're coping in this crisis that really helped. And that was the sort of boxing groups and the football clubs and who then started doing things online. I mean, the other thing that I think we need to really learn is about how we can ensure that people get as equal access as possible to the digital world now that we are moving into this digital world where we can't even get to see a GP, you know, face to face. At least we can't where I live. But, I just remember the last election campaign, the Labour Party, then led by Jeremy Corbyn said free internet for all. It was like, Oh, my God, communism is coming. But free internet for all would have been such an important benefit

during the pandemic. But you know, so we need to think about really ensuring, and particular education establishments, how we're ensuring our students, at universities and at schools are getting as equal access as possible.

Thanks, Anna, and we'll come to Lisa and I am aware that you need to finish at 3pm. So is there anything else you feel is also important?

Lisa Bunting:

I would say that when you look at it, it's easy to become overwhelmed. Everything is so big and hard. And it always has been - if it was easy, we would have done it. And it's also trying to remember that, yeah, you see it all the time, there are pockets of practice, the enthusiasm to develop new services to be really innovative. I mean, that's something we see all the time when we're on the student placements. And there's, you know, step up, step down for kids on the edge of care, pause for women who have been going through repeat pregnancies, you know, just really kind of targeted, really lovely pieces of work. And those really did, and many ways that review showed that in every crisis there is an opportunity and its way, and what came through was that there was a real willingness to move and change. People wanted to do better, but how are they going to achieve that collectively, and the voices of service users and families but also practitioners themselves, as well. And I think that that practice is there, the will do that is there, what we need to understand more broadly is how very skilled this is and the recognition of that - that is not an easy job, and the people who do it and do it well and do it sensitively, are very, very skilled and they need to be supported to do that job instead of micromanaged around process. So, I think there has always been a very strong will in social work. It is eating the elephant isn't it? One bite at a time.

Claire Burns:

Thanks, Lisa. I think your point about understanding the data is so important about how we target and who we support and why we support them. You're saying how we understand what's happening, why in particular communities are they doing a bit better, what is it about, you know, is it the approach of health visitors or nursery nurses, what is it? How do we get to that nuanced understanding. I think that is so important.

Lisa Bunting:

Or employ social workers from that area. They've got more inroads and they understand and they could have been there. In a small place, you know, they can use connections, that can be powerful as well, all that relational base stuff, just giving people the time and space to do what they're good at.

Claire Burns:

Yeah. And as I said, a lot of us have been at the Social Work Scotland conference the last day, and as you are saying, there is a real will to change the conversation with family's

from, what is it that families need to do to get social work? To What can we do to help you? What is it that's actually going to help here? And how can we use it? It is very skilled work. So it's within that piece. And so I'm sorry we have run out of time and I know there's loads of questions in from people. And just summing up I just want to say that what we are hearing is how do we continue to develop trust within our communities that services are going to respond in a non-stigmatising way. You've talked about co-production being so important. And Lisa, you're saying, in with frontline practitioners who know their communities, as well as people who've got lived-experience, and that community based support becoming really important as well. So, I'm hopeful that that is that it's massive, and it's overwhelming, but we've given people some ideas, we've given some people some hope. And that's really important, because I know that on the call, is a number of students, so thanks to them for giving us their time, but also that they are these are people who are really interested and are the next generation of workers, so hopefully we've given them some information, but some hope, as well and some ideas. So, to John, Anna, and Lisa, thanks. We always appreciate the work and prep that goes in, so thanks so much for giving us your time. Thank you.

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