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Dear Convener,

Tackling child poverty

Thank you for the invitation to take part in the Committee's roundtable evidence session on 10 November and for your subsequent letter on 1 December 2022. I found the format very helpful and your Committee's engagement and the views of the stakeholders around the table were welcome.

The session, alongside the Audit Scotland briefing paper, have raised a number of important issues for the Scottish Government and our partners in Local Government which we are working through. The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Housing and Local Government wrote to the Auditor General outlining the Government's response to the paper. This response is attached as it may be useful for your Committee's interests.

Use of data to inform decision making

I agree with the issues raised at the roundtable on the importance of investing in the right things and making sure we have the evidence to underpin our investment decisions. In the context of stretching child poverty targets and a limited budget it is even more vital that we understand the impact of all of our policy choices and can make decisions based on a robust understanding of what works, and what does not.

We continue to work across government to ensure that investments are delivering against our priorities, including through robust evaluations to support decisions around investments. [Annex 2](#) of *Best Start, Bright Futures* sets out our overarching approach to evaluating action to tackle child poverty.

The evidence session discussed the time lag in obtaining the official statistics used to measure progress toward the 4 statutory targets. The relative, absolute and combined low income and material deprivation estimates we publish are based on a sample survey, the UK Family Resources survey (FRS), conducted by the Department for Work and Pensions



(DWP). The data from the FRS is usually published in March the year after it is collected – and this is the time lag referred to during the session.

We are committed to using these indicators given they are essential to understand progress towards the statutory targets set by Parliament. However, they are not the only data source we use and they are also not the most appropriate measures for understanding the effectiveness of specific policies, as even if data were available in a more timely manner it would not isolate the impact of specific policies.

We monitor a more detailed suite of indicators through our [Child Poverty Measurement Framework](#) and are continually working with colleagues across government and partners to build on new evidence to improve and adapt our approach where necessary. Policy specific evaluations are also a more relevant source of information on the effectiveness of different approaches. For example, the [interim evaluation of the Scottish Child Payment](#) found that payments have helped people with the cost of living, one of the key drivers of child poverty. It showed that payments have led to increased child-related spend, reduced financial pressure on households, and in some cases helped recipients to avoid debt. A full evaluation is scheduled for 2024/25 and will assess the impact of the increased payment and the extension of payments to eligible children aged under 16.

To support delivery of our approach to evaluation we have established an internal evaluation network with analytical leads and intend to publish a framework that will support policy leads across the Scottish Government to embed child poverty within their own evaluations. Data from policy evaluations and the Child Poverty Measurement Framework will enable more timely and relevant assessments of policy impact in advance of the official statistics demonstrating our progress toward the targets. This information will support decision making around the effectiveness of different policies to tackle child poverty and support policy alterations as required.

In addition to our focus on evaluation, we have put in place internal governance structures underpinning *Best Start, Bright Futures* to include internal quarterly performance reporting which seeks information on impact, performance against outcomes and progress on evaluation. These formal oversight arrangements, including the newly-created Tackling Child Poverty Programme Board, are there to support me in my role as Accountable Officer and enable us to understand progress on delivery of actions and how actions are implemented, monitored and evaluated.

The Tackling Child Poverty Programme Board includes external members from across local government, the third sector, academia and business who bring their skill, expertise and challenge to our work. This means that we build on the desire to collaborate, communicate and work through cross-cutting risks and blockages – stepping out of silo working to achieve shared outcomes.

There is also regular reporting to the Scottish Government's Executive Team in its delivery oversight mode. This rigorous focus on delivery reporting, alongside policy evaluations; the advice of the Poverty and Inequality Commission; the input from the Programme Board and other stakeholders, will help inform decisions on any changes to our approach that may be required.

Local decision making

As the Committee will recognise, responsibility for action to tackle child poverty sits at various levels of government in Scotland. It is therefore for local areas to determine what specific and targeted action they take, within the approach we are taking in Scotland.

The Scottish Government supports local partners to identify, evaluate and share practice in tackling child poverty. Since 2018 we have funded the Improvement Service to provide support to local partners through a national child poverty coordinator. The coordinator has established a peer support network for local child poverty leads, enabling the identification and sharing of practice. We also fund the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU) to provide additional analytical support and advice to local partners.

The Local Child Poverty Co-ordination Group ('national partners group'), consisting of the Improvement Service; COSLA; Scottish Government; SPIRU; CPAG; the Poverty Alliance and Public Health Scotland, works together to support councils and health boards in fulfilling their statutory reporting duty and continually improving their approach to tackling child poverty. The group is currently developing and testing a revised approach to delivering this support and ensuring local child poverty leads are aware of the package of improvement tools and resources available, and that local learning and feedback is informing national policy and practice. This includes supporting the establishment of a rural child poverty network focused on data and intelligence challenges faced by rural areas to enable more in-depth peer learning and understanding of how child poverty is being addressed in different areas and settings.

We have also held the first in a series of collaborative learning events, bringing together key partners from national and local government, health and the third sector to share insights from the Dundee and Glasgow pathfinders and to highlight innovative approaches being taken across local authorities to tackle child poverty in their areas. These events will continue to provide a forum for sharing and an opportunity to connect and learn from each other.

In addition to working together with local areas to strengthen our collective efforts to tackle child poverty, many of the individual policies within in *Best Start, Bright Futures* are also delivered in close partnership with local areas. For example, the expanded Early Learning and Childcare offer and No One Left Behind approach to employability are both examples of national level policy delivered through local government partnership.

Partnership

Best Start, Bright Futures has a clear ambition of moving from siloed working to delivering a more joined up, holistic, person-centred approach across different policy areas and delivery partners. Partnership is key to this, with many actions requiring strong partnerships and closer collaborative working with local government, the wider public sector, third sector and private sector partners.

Through our Pathfinders in Glasgow and Dundee, and in Clackmannanshire through the Social Innovation Partnership with the Hunter Foundation, we are trialling new ways of working to deliver this joined up approach in practice, working across UK, Scottish and local government to focus on the needs of parents and families rather than the role of individual organisations, and embed this into a new and more person-centred approach. For example, strong partnership working and accountability is a key component to the successful delivery

of the Dundee Pathfinder. The partnership between Scottish Government, DWP, Social Security Scotland and Dundee City Council is testing, implementing and evaluating more integrated and effective ways of providing that holistic support to parents and families to tackle the three main drivers to tackle child poverty; through employment; increased income from benefits; and support with the cost of living. Progress is managed and monitored through a governance structure which has representation of each partnership organisation from a working to senior strategic level. This structure ensures that learning is shared quickly and issues are unblocked using collective power and resource.

This partnership approach to the work with parents and families in Dundee is showing some promising signs of success largely contingent on the deep and trusted relationships with families that local key workers have been able to build up, by listening to what matters to them and acting on it quickly.

The Glasgow pathfinder has been shaped by a shared vision – the service was designed with input from a range of partners across the city who have attended a number of evidence and learning workshops and service design workshops throughout the year.

Glasgow City Council is working with a range of internal and external stakeholders and overcoming cultural barriers that have traditionally kept departments in silos with their own data and their own funding. Great progress has been made with Health and Social Care and the pathfinder team wish to replicate this across sectors, and a new data sharing agreement with the Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector will enable partners to work better together as part of the 'no wrong door' model based on person centred service delivery.

Across the Scottish Government we are clear that a national mission to tackle child poverty cannot be achieved by one organisation – and it will require partners across Scotland coming together with a shared ambition. Your Committee's roundtable session demonstrated the importance of hearing multiple perspectives and understanding the role we can all play in tackling child poverty and I look forward to the Parliament's continued close engagement with this vital issue.

Yours sincerely



PAUL JOHNSTON