

Child Poverty Strategy

Submission to the Scottish Government consultation

Question 1

Do you agree with the Scottish Government including in statute an ambition to eradicate child poverty?

Social Work Scotland is in agreement with the Scottish Government including in statute an ambition to eradicate child poverty.

Poverty damages. It damages childhoods, life chances and societies¹. It has links to increased incidences of crime, violence, domestic abuse, social exclusion, alcohol and substance abuse, poor mental health, poor housing and living conditions, lack of educational attainment and early death². For families, it means every day having to make unpalatable choices because there is not enough money to meet basic needs.

Children are more likely than adults to live in households that are poor³. The recent UN Committee on the Rights of the Child fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom (UK) noted that infant and child mortality in the UK is linked with the level of social and economic deprivation and inequality. Despite this, the Welfare Reform and Work Act (2016) which amended the Child Poverty Act (2010), repealed the statutory targets and any government obligation to produce child poverty strategies.

Scottish Government 2014/2015 figures indicate that more than 1 in 5 (220,000) children are living in poverty in Scotland. This has a significant direct impact on developing children who are less likely to achieve and more likely to experience chronic illness and poorer mental health than those in higher income families⁴. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation published an evidence review in March 2016 examining the relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect⁵. It found a strong association between socio economic circumstances and the chances of a child experiencing child abuse and neglect. Whilst poverty in itself is neither a necessary or sufficient explanation for child abuse and neglect, the increased likelihood associated with poverty is indicative of a social inequality. Poverty can make it more difficult

¹ <http://cpag.org.uk/content/impact-poverty>

² <http://www.poverties.org/blog/effects-of-poverty>

³ http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/coping_with_complexity.pdf

⁴ http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/2013_child_poverty_briefing_1.pdf

⁵ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect-evidence-review>

to effectively meet the wellbeing needs of children even for the most resourceful parents and carers.

We note also the particular relationship between poverty and domestic abuse which affects children – women living in the poorest households are 3 times more likely to experience domestic abuse⁶.

Action needs to be taken urgently to set up mechanisms for the eradication of child poverty, including the re-establishing of targets within a clear timed framework of measurable outcomes, monitoring and reporting. However, targets and reporting alone are insufficient. The Child Poverty Bill should also provide an enabling platform for the Scottish Government and Community Planning Partnerships to tackle the underlying root causes of child poverty, including appropriate funding and strategic support. This should include the creation of dedicated national and local child poverty work streams and adequate resourcing of these.

It may also be necessary to introduce poverty impact assessments (similar to those in place for equality purposes) to ensure no other legislation or guidance etc would work against the principles of this.

Question 2

What are your views on making income target statutory?

Social Work Scotland is in agreement with this proposal. Targets without any statutory backing would be less likely to be achieved and resources and strategies to meet them would be competing with other demands. A statutory basis would better support prioritisation of action to address child poverty.

However, we note that the benefits cap is due to be reduced in November 2016 (with the exception of those in receipt of carer's allowance) and the intention of the UK government is to restrict tax credits to two children per family. This feasibly will increase the number of children experiencing poverty and without a detailed plan and additional funding, make it more difficult for targets to be achieved.

Whilst the target threshold appears to be adjusted based on the composition of the household, it may be necessary to investigate whether other adjustments are necessary (and possible) for those households where additional and increased costs of living routinely exist such as families experiencing homelessness or disability.

Question 3

How do you think the role of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Child Poverty can be developed to ensure that they play a key role in developing the legislation?

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/feb/12/14-million-women-suffered-domestic-abuse-last-year-ons-figures-show>

This group should have a key role in leading on action to address child poverty. This should include providing support to Community Planning Partnerships in drafting local strategy as well as a monitoring role in confirming that at both national and local levels, action is being taken to address child poverty and outcomes targets are linked to equivalent local planning targets for child abuse and neglect. This group should be responsible for sharing best practice and innovation but should also be reporting back to ministers on progress made. The membership of this group will be critical and must include representation of the voice of the child.

If we are in agreement that child poverty must be a national priority, consideration should be given by ministers to strengthening the Child Poverty Bill with respect to the proposal for regular progress reporting to Parliament. This should not only focus on the four targets, but also on progress made in tackling the spectrum of underlying causes and consequences of child poverty.

Question 4

How can links between the national strategy and local implementation be improved? What could local partners do to contribute towards these goals?

The reporting structure for the strategy needs to be linked to the local Single Outcomes Agreements and the activity of Community Planning Partnerships and Integration Joint Boards (regarding their specific delegated responsibilities for health and wellbeing). There must be clear links made to Children's Services Plans to ensure that action to address poverty cuts across wider action to support and protect children's wellbeing.

As stated above, the reporting of progress on child poverty should not be confined to the target indicators alone. Poverty is a multidimensional issue and reporting should be from a number of data sources linked to the local outcomes in education, health improvement, child protection, housing and income maximisation etc.

As previously stated, there would be a clear role for the Ministerial Advisory Group in facilitating the sharing of best practice and innovation. Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) should lead locally on action to address child poverty, but they need to be provided with opportunities to learn from each other about what works. The Scottish Government, through the Ministerial Advisory Group, are best placed to coordinate and support local CPPs and to provide an overarching strategic support.

Bramely and Watkins 2013 review for the Scottish Government of the potential scope for a 'poverty toolkit' for CPPs⁷ highlighted that there is an information gap on local incidences of poverty measured in a way consistent with Scottish Government goals. Against a background of reducing budgets, many local authorities cannot afford to collate the data required on local incidences of poverty. The Scottish Government should take the lead on this and collate local information and analysis of poverty throughout Scotland.

We note that co-ordination is not only required with respect to local areas, but also across the related national strategic areas which impact on children. Work undertaken as part of the Early Years Collaborative for example encompasses child poverty. A co-ordinated approach would more effectively maximise resources at both a national and local level.

⁷ <http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/assets/local-incomes-poverty-scotland.pdf>

Provision of local income maximisation has to be married to the Scottish Government National Standards for Advice and Information Providers. The Scottish Government should look to standardise reporting on these matters across all providers and should consider funding a universal reporting tool.

Question 5

What are your views on the income-based measures of poverty proposed for the Scottish child poverty targets?

Overall these are useful targets and largely in line with organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG). In addition, consideration needs to be given to “in work” poverty. Scottish Government statistics indicate that in 2013/2014, 80,000 children in poverty lived in working households. Consideration therefore needs to be given to having a mechanism which observes disposable income. There also requires to be a further drilling down to what CPAG terms poverty depth, which is the measurement of how far away from the poverty line those are who are living in poverty. As we know, for those living in poverty there are hidden costs. Utilities can often be on a pay as you go basis. Housing insecurity and private renting can mean additional costs if the housing isn’t adequate (eg heating) and frequently having to relocate can push up expenses overall. Deeper poverty has a more severe effect on children’s life chances. The measurement of this gap between the lowest income families and the median is important as tracking the median income alone can produce inaccurate results. Adopting a poverty depth measure will help measure how deep and how persistent poverty is⁸.

Question 6

What are your views on the Scottish Government’s proposals for the levels of child poverty that the targets will be set at?

We agree that these are the correct targets for relative, deprivation and persistent poverty and understand that these are based on the previous existing targets set across the UK prior to the abolition of child poverty targets. However, we question the target for absolute poverty. As a nation we must make a clear statement that it is unacceptable for children in Scotland to be living in absolute poverty. Support from the Scottish Government must be given to local authorities and their partners to ensure that effective remedies are in place to support any child found to be living in these conditions.

Question 7

What are your views on the Scottish Government’s proposals to set the targets after housing costs?

We agree that “After Housing Costs” is the correct approach for Scotland. Housing costs are an unavoidable necessity and we note that for those living in poverty, can often cost more.

⁸ <http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAG-Poverty143-relative-pov-measure.pdf>

“Before housing costs” treats a rise in housing benefit/universal credit consequent on a rise in rent, as an increase in income and is therefore problematic and misleading. We note also that many families find themselves in poverty due to a change of life circumstances such as illness, disability and separation; these change of circumstances often have a profound effect on housing costs and disposable income with parents having to make difficult decisions to maintain the home.

Question 8

What are your views on the Scottish Government’s proposal to set targets that are expected to be achieved by 2030?

We agree that the target year of 2030 is the correct one. It is important that a long term strategy is in place to ensure that there remains a significant and continued focus on poverty, although further detail is required as to how targets will be expected to be progressed.

We know that early intervention to support families in poverty is key⁹. In recent times, there has been a clear shift across children’s services towards earlier intervention. However, local partnerships are finding it increasingly challenging to identify resources to invest in new approaches despite recognising that this could produce longer term savings¹⁰. The reduction in budgets to local authorities and third sector providers needs to be addressed as it impacts on the ability of services to provide support to vulnerable children and their families.

Question 9

What are your views on the proposal that Scottish Ministers will be required by the Bill to produce a child poverty delivery plan every five years, and to report on this annually?

Although this appears reasonable, there is a risk that because they are for a longer duration, this could encourage plans to be more general and not at the level of specificity required for meaningful change. There is also a possibility that agencies could hold off driving through local initiatives awaiting more structural change at the macroeconomic level.

As already stated, Community Planning Partnerships have a key role to play in eradicating child poverty. The way that employability services, education, income maximisation services, money advice services, housing, childcare and local health services are delivered can act either to reinforce the poverty experienced by children or to prevent poverty and support families out of poverty.

Cognisance should be given to the life span of other plans relating to children such as local children’s services plans which tend to be produced on a 3 yearly cycle. If not aligned with these, then consideration needs to be given as to how the links to child poverty planning and reporting arrangements would be made.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2012/aug/10/supporting-families-poverty-early-intervention>

¹⁰ <http://www.careinspectorate.com/index.php/news/3362-joint-inspections-of-services-for-children-and-young-people-2014-16>

Question 10

Do you have any suggestions for how the measurement of the framework could be usefully improved? Are there any additional indicators that can be added?

It is useful to have a measurement framework, however some of the current measures should be reviewed.

With respect to pockets, the measures do not capture the additional costs associated with short term housing solutions which many in poverty can find themselves in – not just rent, but deposits, fixtures and furnishings, electricity and gas (if you are given a meter and don't have access to the best direct debit energy deals), fluctuations in transport costs etc.

With respect to prospects, the 5 a day and screen time measures are arguably issues for the entire population, not just those in poverty. A better measure is whether there is affordable access to fresh produce, leisure activities etc. It is also necessary to review the language with respect to the measure of those who can speak to their mother; children should feel that they have access to and can confide in an appropriate adult and it would depend on the child's circumstances whether this is their mother. It may be better if this was parent/carer. Modern apprenticeships are used by many young people, not just those in poverty. It might be best to focus on the positive destination measures.

With respect to places, it is useful to consider measures more directly linked to access to amenities eg access to libraries, leisure centres, community centres where access including transport is low or no cost. Although it isn't just whether there are local facilities; the quality of these and whether people feel safe accessing them is important.

Poverty is multi-dimensional and the Scottish Government should seek to link other data sources with action to tackle child poverty. Examples from other areas of policy could include the number of Scottish employers offering the Living Wage and who have signed up to the Scottish Business Pledge; the number of children in poverty who have a working parent and the number of children living in households with income below the living wage.

With respect to those in receipt of benefits, households with children affected by benefit sanctions should be subject to reporting. The Scottish Government should fully implement the recommendations of the Oakley report¹¹ and consider non-financial alternatives to benefit sanctions. An increase in the percentage of benefit sanction appeals should be a target. Levels of indebtedness for those living in or just above the poverty line should also be reported given that households in poverty have less access to credit and pay a higher cost for it, often at usurious rates.

Measurement of disposable income after housing costs should be reported; similar data is already recorded by Eurostat¹² to demonstrate cost of living and debt difficulties. Consideration should be given to reporting on the "poverty premium" paid by those in

¹¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335144/jsa-sanctions-independent-review.pdf

¹² <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/gdp-and-beyond/quality-of-life/inability-to-make-ends-meet>

poverty for goods and services as they are often unable to pay bills in a single instalment or to pay via direct debit where a discount may apply.

The Scottish Government should also report on the number of local authority areas with anti-poverty strategies and consider making this a statutory duty. With respect to local reporting, it would be useful to focus on the work in schools to address poverty. Targets should be set for example to increase the number of children from low income households attending after school activities and increase the take up of free school meals and school uniforms for those eligible. Another key local target would be an increase in the number of local residents receiving income maximisation and money advice services.

Q11: do you have any additional views on the Child Poverty Bill for Scotland?

The strategy requires a stronger link to the GIRFEC framework. The strategy broadly focuses on educational attainment as a means of lifting children out of poverty. However, as we know, the ability to achieve educational potential is dependent on wellbeing needs being met. This links to Part 1 of the Children and Young Peoples' (Scotland) Act 2014 and the embedding of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into policy. Measurements could be aligned to the SHANARRI indicators and used in conjunction with the My World Triangle to provide a better framework for understanding the impact of and addressing poverty across the dimensions of children's lives.

One final point we would like to make is with reference to the inclusion of the crime victimisation rate in the measurement framework. An Edinburgh study found that poverty has a significant and direct effect on children's likelihood to engage in violence. It further found that the decision making practices of institutions (such as police, hearings systems and criminal courts) disproportionately focus on children from impoverished backgrounds. In other words, children from low socio economic households are more likely to come to the attention of services, be charged by the police, referred to the hearings system and made subject to statutory supervision. The increased likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system continues into adulthood. Arguably Scotland's current system, although being built on care and protection, does not contribute to lifting children out of poverty but does contribute to the labelling of those same children¹³.

It is Social Work Scotland's position that Scotland's age of criminal responsibility is not only out of step with the rest of the UK and against minimum international standards, but is also disproportionately criminalising those children from the poorest backgrounds. Urgent action is necessary to address this. We note that a Scottish Government consultation was undertaken earlier this year, at which point it was indicated that a decision would be made by Ministers in the current session of Parliament.

Social Work Scotland
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¹³ <http://www.criminallawandjustice.co.uk/features/Link-Between-Poverty-and-Crime>