

Peer Review: Children First – pilot local consultation platforms on child poverty (Belgium, 13-14 January 2015)

United Kingdom¹

**Child Poverty Unit,
UK Government**

1. Child Poverty in the United Kingdom

Background to Child Poverty Act

The Child Poverty Act 2010² constitutes the main backbone of child poverty policy in the United Kingdom. Specifically, the Child Poverty Act:

- Established four separate child poverty targets to be met by 2020/21.
- Requires the UK government to publish a regular UK child poverty strategy.
- Requires the Scottish and Northern Irish Ministers to publish child poverty strategies.³
- Established an independent Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission to provide advice on, and monitor progress towards improving, social mobility and child poverty.
- Requires the UK government to publish annual progress reports.
- Places new duties on local authorities and other “delivery partners” in England to work together to tackle child poverty.

The cross-government Child Poverty Unit is primarily responsible for supporting Ministers to ensure that the provisions contained in the Child Poverty Act 2010 are carried out. The Child Poverty Unit works closely with UK child poverty Ministers in the Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty’s Treasury to achieve this, as well as other government ministers and external stakeholders.

Monitoring and Evaluation of Child Poverty

The Child Poverty Act 2010 committed the UK government to significantly reduce levels of child poverty by 2020/21. As part of this, the government has set four separate child poverty targets to be met by 2020/21. These are UK-wide targets and include:

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² http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/9/pdfs/ukpga_20100009_en.pdf

³ The Welsh government is also in the process of developing its own Child Poverty Strategy.



Relative poverty	Proportion of children living in households with income below 60 % of median before housing costs. The Act target is less than 10 %.
Absolute poverty	Proportion of children living in households with income below 60 % of the 2010/11 median before housing costs adjusted for prices. The Act target is less than 5 %.
Low income and material deprivation	Proportion of children living in households with income below 70 % of median before housing costs who also experience material deprivation. The Act target is less than 5 %.
Persistent poverty	Proportion of children living in households with an equivalised income below 60 % of median before housing costs in at least three of the last four years. The Act target less than 7 %.

The government reports annually on levels of child poverty in the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) survey.⁴

Child Poverty Policies

The government is legally required to produce a Child Poverty Strategy on a regular basis, which sets out the policies it is taking to help meet its child poverty targets. The strategy covers the whole of the UK, however certain areas of policy are devolved, and so the Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh governments also draw up their own individual child poverty strategies.

The first strategy was published in 2011 and covered the period 2011-2014. It was entitled *A new approach to child poverty: tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families' lives*.⁵

The current strategy, *Child poverty strategy 2014 to 2017*,⁶ was published in June 2014 and sets out the policies which will be pursued over the next three years. The strategy was based on an in-depth evidence review which identified the key drivers of child poverty.

As outlined in the current strategy, the UK government is taking three strands of action to tackle levels of child poverty.

- **Tackling poverty now:** Raising the incomes of poor children's families by helping parents get into **work** and making work pay. This includes cutting taxes for millions of families, reforming the welfare system, and raising the national minimum wage.
- **Raising living standards:** Supporting the living standards of low-income families through decreasing costs. This includes increasing financial assistance with utility bills, building new affordable homes, and increasing access to affordable credit for poorer families.
- **Future life chances:** Raising **educational outcomes** of poor children to prevent them becoming poor adults, for example, by targeting increased government funding to the most disadvantaged children, providing free school meals to all infant schoolchildren and increasing the amount of early years education available to under 5s.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/households-below-average-income-hbai--2>

⁵ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/177031/CM-8061.pdf

⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/324103/Child_poverty_strategy.pdf



The Child Poverty Strategy, 2014-17, puts particular emphasis on the role of early childhood education. We know that the right support in the earliest years can make a crucial difference in securing good outcomes for children.

In order to achieve this, the government has expanded the amount of early years education available to all 3 and 4 year olds to 15 hours per week. In addition, since September 2014, 40 % of all 2 year olds are entitled to 15 hours per week of early years education. Changes to the welfare system through Universal Credit will also mean that parents will be reimbursed up to 85 % of their childcare costs.

Furthermore, the government has reformed the early years curriculum and raised the qualifications for Early Years teachers, in order to raise standards across the board. From 2015, the Early Years Pupil Premium will provide additional funding for the most disadvantaged children and is specifically designed to better prepare children for the start of school at age 5.

Involvement of stakeholders

The UK government is supported in its work by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (SMCPC). The SMCPC is an independent body which was set up in 2010, and is run by a group of 10 Commissioners drawn from academia, public service, politics, and business. It has statutory duties to hold the government to account and “provide advice on, and monitor progress towards improving, social mobility and child poverty”.

The main responsibilities of the SMCPC include:

- Publishing an annual report setting out their views on progress made in improving social mobility and reducing child poverty in the UK, including against the targets in the **Child Poverty Act 2010**, and describing the measures taken by the Scottish and Welsh governments.
- Providing published advice to ministers (at their request) on how to measure socio-economic disadvantage, social mobility and child poverty.
- Acting as an advocate for social mobility beyond government by challenging employers, the professions and universities amongst others to play their part in improving life chances.

The most recent SMCPC report was published in October 2014 and it made several recommendations to the government:⁷

- Supplement the existing child poverty targets with new measures to give a more rounded picture of poverty and publish a new timescale for achieving them.
- Ensure that welfare reforms and fiscal policies protect the working poor from the impact of austerity, including by empowering the Office for Budget Responsibility to report on each Budget’s impact on poverty and mobility.
- New focus in the early years on ensuring children are school ready at age five, with 85 % of children school ready by 2020 and all by 2025.
- A national parenting campaign to be launched to help more parents become excellent parents, funded by removing childcare tax breaks from families where at least one parent earns over £ 100,000 (approx. EUR 127,800) per year.
- Higher pay to get the best teachers into the worst schools in deprived areas of the county through a new Teachers’ Pay Premium and new pay grades commissioned from the Teachers Pay Review Body.

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2014-report>



- End illiteracy and innumeracy among primary school leavers by 2025 and a new focus on quality careers advice, character development & extra-curricular activity in secondary.
- Closing the attainment gap between poorer and better-off children to be a priority for all schools so that by 2020 more than half of children entitled to free school meals are achieving five good GCSEs rising to two-thirds by 2025.
- Long-term youth unemployment to be ended by 2020 through a package of measures including half of all larger workplaces providing apprenticeships and a new Day One support service to help unemployed young people straight back into work or education.
- Britain to become a Living Wage country by 2025 at the latest, underpinned by a new national pay progression strategy and an expanded role for the Low Pay Commission.
- More shared ownership options for young people to get on the housing ladder and longer-term tenancies to become the norm for families with children in the private rented sector.
- Universities to use the removal of the student numbers cap to significantly close the access gap so that by 2020 they are aiming to admit 5,000 more students from a free schools meals background, with Russell Group universities aiming to admit 3,000 more state school students who have the grades but currently do not get the places.
- Unpaid internships to be ended – through legislation if necessary – by 2020.

The government also consults with a wide range of stakeholders, including the SMCP, when setting targets and devising strategy. For example, when drafting the new *Child Poverty Strategy, 2014-17*, the government launched a 12-week consultation. This involved officials visiting 16 locations around the UK and meeting over 400 individuals, including 195 parents, children and young people, as well as representatives of disabled children, the devolved administrations, local authorities and representatives from the voluntary and community sector.

During these events, we invited formal responses to the consultation; as a result we received 149 written responses. We asked five questions as part of the consultation on the draft Strategy. Two of these focused on respondents' views of the Strategy itself and the actions contained within it. The other three questions asked for examples of what works at a local level in tackling child poverty and how central government can work with other agencies to tackle child poverty.

Analysis of the responses identified six key messages: it is important to make sure work pays; we need to do more to tackle low pay; more homes, better homes, and stable homes are needed; it is important to close the attainment gap between poor children and their peers; and early intervention is absolutely vital in terms of raising educational attainment. A number of responses provided useful examples or case studies that show action taken at a local level to tackle child poverty, some of which have been included within the final Strategy.

Cooperation of various services involved in the fight against child poverty

The government recognises that centrally-led action cannot, by itself, end child poverty. In order to implement its Child Poverty Strategy and meet its targets, the UK government works closely with other key stakeholders in England. (The devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland are responsible for drawing up and implementing their own strategies, although the targets are UK-wide).



The Child Poverty Act 2010 places certain requirements on local authorities (LAs), such as assessing the needs of children living in poverty in their area. The government encourages all local authorities in England to draw up their own local child poverty strategies, which outline the specific local actions being taken to tackle child poverty. Local authorities should work closely with other local organisations (such as Local Enterprise Partnerships) in order to reduce child poverty.

There are many examples of this already happening across the country. For example, in Leeds the City Council and City Region Enterprise Partnership joined together in February 2014 to launch the *More Jobs, Better Jobs* initiative, which seeks to make poverty reduction an integral component of the local economic strategy.⁸ Similarly, in Milton Keynes the local child poverty commission has recently produced a report which examines the causes of child poverty in the local areas and makes recommendations for local stakeholders.⁹

In order to support the work of local actors, the Child Poverty Unit produces a set of local child poverty indicators which can be used by local authorities to better understand the local causes of child poverty. These indicators bring together a variety of administrative benefit and tax credit data, as well published local authority statistics, in an easy and accessible format.

2. Comparison of Belgian consultation platforms to programmes in the UK

The Belgian consultation platforms share some similarities with the UK government's Troubled Families Programme. This programme brings together local services to provide strategic support to families in need; many of whom tend to have characteristics which put them at greater risk of being in poverty. The programme also aims to address the causes of disadvantage in certain families, and is consistent with some of the aims of the *European Commission's Recommendation on Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage*, by increasing access to quality services and supporting parents' access to the labour market.

The current Troubled Families Programme was launched in December 2011, and aims to turn around the lives of 120,000 troubled families in England by the end of the current Parliament by working with 152 local authorities in England.

Like the consultation platforms, the Troubled Families Programme also provides a locally coordinated approach, which seeks to "turn around" families where family members: are involved in youth crime or anti-social behaviour; have children who are regularly truanting or not in school; have an adult on out of work benefits; and cause high costs to the taxpayer.

The aims of the programme are to: get children back in to school; reduce their criminal and anti-social behaviour; and get parents on the road back to work, or into work.

Local authorities use a variety of information sources to identify troubled families which qualify for help under the programme. This could involve school attendance records, criminal records, or unemployment data.

After identifying families, family intervention workers from the local authority make contact with family members. It is their job to establish which problems the family

⁸ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/324103/Child_poverty_strategy.pdf, p. 51.

⁹ http://www.miltonkeynes.gov.uk/assets/attach/11124/Child_Poverty_Report-_24.05.12.pdf



need help with, and to coordinate local services to help to solve these. The government has an additional 163 Troubled Families Employment Advisers, whose job it is to work alongside the family intervention workers to help families access the correct welfare assistance and gain employment.

Here is one case study of how the Troubled Families Programme worked with a family in Portsmouth:

Mum had recurring mental health problems and was struggling to manage everyday tasks. She was in debt - including an eviction notice for rent arrears. Her mental health had affected her motivation to work; the conditions at home were poor and there was no working cooker. Her children were not attending school due to mum's anxiety about being separated from them and the youngest was not in nursery. The family was known to social services and there was concern about mum's capacity to meet her children's needs. The eldest daughter was often caring for the other children.

The family worker focused on developing a good relationship with mum to understand what was happening in the home. She worked hard to build the kind of relationship that allowed her to challenge mum's behaviour without alienating her. She helped her get to her health appointments which helped mum manage her anxiety. She helped mum move the children to a new school and nursery nearer to their home and then accompanied her on the new school run so mum could overcome her anxiety about the change. As a result of the support she received, the children's school attendance is now at 100 % and they are progressing well. The eldest child is no longer caring for her younger siblings and the youngest has started nursery.

Conditions at home have improved greatly and mum is receiving the right support for her mental health problems. Mum has set up a payment plan to get back in control of her finances and social services are no longer concerned about her parenting. Mum is now volunteering as a first step to returning to work.

So far, the government's Troubled Families Programme has turned around the lives of over 69,000 of England's 120,000 troubled families by August 2014. Over 117,000 families are already being worked with, and the scheme remains on track to meet the target of turning around 120,000 by April 2015.

