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How to deliver a child poverty strategy

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Executive summary

The UK government has committed to publishing a UK-wide child poverty strategy later this year. To help inform the government's work, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), with support from Save the Children UK, and funding from Impact on Urban Health, have conducted research on how to deliver an effective child poverty strategy.

Between August and October 2024, we conducted interviews with 40 practitioners with first-hand experience of delivering a national child poverty strategy or with expertise in a specific policy area. This report presents the findings from this research and makes a series of recommendations for the forthcoming strategy. The findings are presented in two parts:

- (1) the successful implementation of a strategy
- (2) the priority policies for inclusion in the forthcoming strategy.

How to implement a child poverty strategy

Measures and targets are essential to ensure the effectiveness of any government strategy. The most widely recognised measure of child poverty is having a household income below 60 per cent of the median, after housing costs. This should be the primary measure against which to assess the impact of the child poverty strategy, as it is robust and aligns with the measures used in the Scottish and Welsh strategies, ensuring consistency across the UK.

Additional poverty metrics can provide greater insights on the strategy's impact, namely: depth of poverty, absolute poverty, poverty persistence, deprivation and poverty rates among at-risk groups. Improved data collection, particularly at local levels and for at-risk groups, alongside engaging those with lived experience, is essential to effectively monitor the impact the strategy is having and inform what new actions can be taken.

Targets are crucial for driving government action throughout the duration of the strategy. They should be ambitious but achievable, such as halving child poverty in 10 years and eradicating it in 20.

In light of the steps that have already been taken by devolved nations and some local authorities to reduce child poverty, there needs to be coordination between Westminster and other levels of government to achieve a strategic approach to child poverty reduction. Coordinating the work of government departments and levels of government should be managed by a dedicated Child Poverty Unit within central government. The public leadership and rhetoric of the Prime Minister, Chancellor and senior ministers helps reinforce to the public and all delivery partners that child poverty remains a priority.

Robust accountability mechanisms are needed to sustain effective child poverty reduction efforts. Legislation is the most powerful tool for accountability as it can put targets, a reporting framework and an independent monitoring body on a statutory footing. It also embeds long-term commitments to child poverty reduction across the machinery of government.

Priority policies to reduce child poverty

Social security is the most effective policy lever for addressing child poverty. Cuts to social security over the past 15 years have driven an increase in child poverty in the UK. Scrapping the two-child limit and benefit cap are the most urgent steps needed to reverse this trend and reduce child poverty.

Long-term investment in social security will also be essential. For example, increasing child benefit and strengthening support for housing costs and disability benefits would help millions of families. Universal credit also needs to be reformed as the current system enforces strict conditions without addressing barriers to work like childcare and job quality.

Child poverty affects every aspect of school life including children's participation at school as families struggle with the cost of school uniforms and meals. Expanding free school meals and providing uniform grants would ease cost pressures on low-income families and help to ensure that children fulfil their potential at school.

Housing is the biggest expense for low-income families. Falls in the amount of support families can get towards their rent, alongside a shortage of social housing, have led to record levels of child homelessness. This can be eased in the short term by unfreezing local housing allowance and abolishing the benefit cap, but to address this challenge in the longer term, the stock of social housing needs to increase by 100,000 homes a year for 20 years.

Affordable childcare is crucial for parental employment and child development, yet the current system is overly complex, restrictive and costly. Some people, such as student parents, disabled parents and those with no recourse to public funds, are excluded from key childcare benefits. Including these groups in the childcare offer and removing work requirements for free pre-school hours will increase accessibility and affordability, benefiting children and their parents.

Early years services, and particularly health services, play an important role in mitigating the impact of child poverty but, in the absence of action to increase household incomes, services will struggle to succeed. Nonetheless, early years services such as Sure Start and health visitors have been shown to improve outcomes for children in poverty.

The forthcoming strategy represents a huge opportunity to significantly reduce child poverty in the UK, which has been rising over the past 15 years. There are many features that the strategy should include and policies it should pursue to begin to bring down child poverty. Among these, two areas are of paramount importance. Firstly, the strategy must contain binding targets to reduce and eliminate child poverty over the short, medium and long term. Secondly, the strategy must include investment in the social security system, starting with scrapping the two-child limit and the benefit cap. These two elements will provide a strong foundation for a strategy that delivers meaningful reductions in child poverty, improving the lives of millions of children and families across the UK.

Introduction

There are record numbers of children living in poverty in the UK today, and without government action, child poverty is set to rise further over the coming years. Families with children are more at risk of poverty than other groups. This is because children come with additional costs: all the items we know children need at different stages in their lives, from nappies through to school uniform. There are also the wider costs that drive up household budgets: housing costs are higher, energy usage is greater, and childcare costs can be significant for families. This pressure on household finances affects living standards for families, and comes at precisely the time when parents' capacity to work is more limited because they may be on parental leave or working part time to manage childcare. Earning capacity is a particular problem for single parents, who cannot rely on another income, or share childcare responsibilities.

These additional costs of children and the barriers to meeting these costs through employment will always exist. As a society, we have a collective interest in supporting children and parents while they navigate this time-limited but expensive stage of life, and the government can play a critical role in helping to bridge the gap between what families need and what they have. But instead, we have seen the reverse of this: over the past 15 years there has been a stripping back of support for families with children in the form of cuts to social security and the services that families access. This reduction in support has been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. The result is record numbers of children living in poverty and increasing numbers of children living in deep poverty, which is particularly harmful for children's outcomes.

It is in this context that the UK government has committed to developing a UK-wide child poverty strategy, due for publication later this year. This is a hugely positive step, and creates an opportunity to realise some of the change that children, families and the communities they live in so desperately need.

The government has announced four themes to the strategy: income, costs, financial resilience, and services for children and families. While action across these different areas is welcome, it is vital that the priority for the strategy is increasing family income. Increasing income lifts families out of poverty and unlocks the multitude of benefits that come with this for every area of children's lives, from educational outcomes to future work prospects and even life expectancy.

Every single day more and more children are being pulled into poverty, and their day-to-day experience of childhood risks getting worse. The consequences of living in poverty for children are often stark, multifaceted, long-lasting, and can begin to accrue even before a child is born. They affect individuals, families, public services and society at large. A response that is commensurate with the shape and scale of the problem is urgent, essential, and no less than children living up and down the country deserve.

About this research

To help inform the development of the forthcoming strategy, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), with support from Save the Children UK, have conducted research on how to deliver an effective child poverty strategy, funded by Impact on Urban Health. Between August and October 2024, we conducted interviews with 40 practitioners with a range of expertise. Twenty of our interviewees have experience of developing or delivering child poverty strategies in various contexts, including under New Labour, in the devolved nations and internationally. The other 20 interviewees are subject experts who were asked about their policy priorities for inclusion in a strategy. Please see Appendix 2 for a list of organisations and people we interviewed.¹

This report details the findings from this research and makes a series of recommendations for the development of the forthcoming strategy. These recommendations are based on findings from the

¹ Interview participants have not endorsed the findings of this report.

interviews, and from roundtables on social security, employment, and services for children and families held to inform the government's development of the child poverty strategy. We have also incorporated expertise from CPAG, Save the Children UK and Changing Realities, a participatory project involving nearly 200 parents and carers on a low income.²

The first section of this report focuses on the successful implementation of a child poverty strategy. It covers:

- Metrics
- Targets
- Leadership
- Delivery and coordination
- Reporting
- Accountability
- Working across different levels of government
- Supporting local government
- Engaging people with lived experience

The second section of this report covers the policies that should be included within a UK-wide child poverty strategy as a priority. It covers the following policy areas:

- Social security
- Employment
- Education
- Housing
- Childcare
- Health and other services for children and families

² [changingrealities.org](https://www.changingrealities.org)

Section 1: how to implement a child poverty strategy

Metrics

Metrics are critical to the success of the strategy, as they will allow the government to monitor the impact that the strategy is having, to assess what is working and to inform when a change of course is needed.

Our interviewees were unanimous that income-based metrics are the best way to measure progress on reducing child poverty. As poverty is widely understood as lacking the resources that are customary in society, in a market economy, income is the best quantifiable representation of the resources available to families. Increasing the income of low-income families has also been shown to drive improvements in other measures of wellbeing. If income poverty is falling, many other measures of wellbeing will improve.

Keep it very focused on income because, if you fix income, you'll fix those other things [health and education outcomes] anyway.

The most widely-used and accepted 'headline measure' of poverty is having a household income below 60 per cent of the median equivalised income. Income is measured 'after housing costs' in recognition that housing is an unavoidable expense which makes a significant difference to the resources available to a family. This measure allows for historical and international comparisons, and it is the measure used in the existing child poverty strategies in Scotland and Wales. Using the same measure for the UK strategy will ensure all levels of government are aligned.

Interviewees reported that using a suite of income-based measures provides a richer understanding of how poverty is changing. They saw the following metrics as complementary to the headline poverty measure:

- As the median can change from year to year and sometimes fall, for example in times of recession, there can be learning from looking at a fixed ('absolute') poverty threshold.
- Considering the depth of poverty, alongside other established metrics such as persistent low income and material deprivation, will show if/how the circumstances of families in poverty are changing, even if their income has not improved enough to lift them above the poverty threshold.
- It is useful to look at not just the headline rate but also the poverty rates for different groups who are disproportionately affected by poverty (eg, Black and minority ethnic children, households containing disabled people, lone-parent families).

Interviewees were also clear that there is an important balance to be struck. Too many measures will make it harder for the government to communicate what it is doing to internal and external stakeholders. Instead, it should focus on a small number of measures which can provide the richest picture.

If you make it too complicated people won't understand it. You want it in a form that a journalist will understand.... Just a couple of things that people can remember and will stick in their head.

Some interviewees highlighted that secondary indicators can help in specific contexts, and this report contains a list of suggested secondary indicators in Appendix 1. In a cross-government strategy, delivery partners may use additional non-income metrics to internally monitor areas they directly influence (for example, indicators on educational or health outcomes would be used by the corresponding departments). But these metrics should be chosen carefully to avoid siloed departmental working (as health interventions could affect educational outcomes, for example). It is crucial that all departments share the goal of reducing an income poverty indicator.

You need to be clear on what the outcomes are, what good looks like, what the risks and the issues are, and the challenges involved, and where the key decision points are, and who owns those decisions.

Some measures may have limited value at the local level. For example, the Family Resources Survey does not allow for robust estimates of income poverty at a local authority level. It is therefore important that central government provides English local authorities with guidance on what metrics they should use to monitor how poverty is changing in their area and the needs of different groups.

Recommendations

- The government should monitor the progress made under the strategy using a small number of metrics based on household income – the primary measure of child poverty.
- The government should use relative poverty (after housing costs) as the headline measure for the strategy, as the most widely-used and accepted poverty measure and to align with strategies in the devolved nations.
- Secondary indicators (which do not directly measure income) can be useful for other levels of government and specific departments to monitor their progress, but these should not overshadow or distract from the overall objective of reducing child poverty (see Appendix 1 for suggested secondary indicators).

Targets

Interviewees were unanimous that the forthcoming strategy must publicly set targets to reduce child poverty. Contrasting the experience of Scotland and Northern Ireland shows the impact that targets can have. In Scotland, targets have galvanized impactful action across government, while in Northern Ireland the absence of targets meant the well-intended work was less focused and ultimately had less of an effect.

[On Northern Ireland] There were no specific targets.... It came back to a lot of good intentions, a lot of people meaning well, but that doesn't actually reduce poverty.

[On Scotland] The targets have helped to embed the understanding that you can't resolve child poverty without increasing the resources available to families.... Having the targets has helped keep the focus on money, on resources, on families having a sufficient income.

Quantifiable targets can also help government demonstrate its effectiveness at delivering the strategy to the electorate.

A target that is reported on and the press are aware of as something that the government has loudly committed to, that does make a difference.

When choosing targets, interviewees highlighted the following factors:

Targets should reflect what the strategy is aiming to achieve. A strategy aiming to reduce child poverty should include a target of reducing child poverty to X per cent by Y date, and by X number to Y number. Another target relating to the depth of poverty (such as reducing the average poverty depth to X per cent by Y date) will spur the strategy to increase incomes for all children in poverty and help to demonstrate progress even for children who remain in poverty.

Targets need to be aspirational yet achievable. Targets should be ambitious enough to have a tangible impact on families in poverty, but the government will struggle to maintain buy-in from delivery partners for the duration of the strategy if they are seen as unachievable. Some strategies have identified what an 'aspirational yet achievable' child poverty target is by looking at the child poverty levels achieved in world-leading countries.

Some interviewees talked about the need for milestone targets for long-term strategies. Milestone targets help the government demonstrate early successes to the electorate, as well as building momentum towards a longer-term target lasting multiple parliamentary terms.

The interim targets have been quite powerful for galvanising the government.... The Scottish child payment, for example, probably wouldn't exist in the form that it was in if we didn't have the interim targets in Scotland.

As with measures, secondary targets can be beneficial for internal purposes to articulate the aim of a specific programme or policy within the strategy. These do not need to be determined at the outset of the strategy but can be incorporated to monitor specific policies and programmes that the government is delivering. However, interviewees cautioned that secondary targets should be used sparingly, otherwise they risk taking focus away from the overall target of reducing child poverty.

Recommendations

- The forthcoming strategy should include targets to reduce child poverty that are aspirational yet achievable, learning from what has been achieved in other countries.
- The UK government should set a target to halve child poverty within 10 years and eradicate child poverty within 20 years. ('Eradication' is understood as the point where less than 10 per cent of children live in a household with an income below 60 per cent of the median).

Leadership

Interviewees consistently emphasised that strong leadership at the highest levels of government is essential for the successful delivery of a cross-government child poverty strategy. Interviewees involved in developing and/or delivering the previous UK strategy under the New Labour government noted that clear commitment from the Prime Minister and Chancellor ensured the strategy remained a priority, resulting in more than a million children being lifted out of poverty.

The Prime Minister led it. He made commitments to it. It was very much part of his public commitment. It was at various speeches, and he had it as part of his vision.... Obviously, the Chancellor did as well, but I think that's really, really vital: to have that as a mission for your government. That will mean that everyone knows that it's not negotiable. Everyone will know that it's part of your job to further it and work towards it, and everyone will know that, if it doesn't succeed, that everyone fails. That leadership from the top is really important.

In Scotland, leadership from the First Minister has played a pivotal role in maintaining a focus on child poverty.

For the last three First Ministers, we've had very clear first ministerial leadership on child poverty. They've made it personally one of their top priorities and articulated that in different ways... having it backed and articulated by the First Minister, even though the actual responsibility within government sits with the Cabinet Secretary, I think has been quite important.

Some key themes emerged from interviews when discussing what this leadership needs to look like:

- **Public commitment:** frequent public statements from senior leadership reinforce child poverty as a government priority. This creates the opportunity to explain to the country why reducing child poverty matters, and that government is working effectively to make progress towards its goals.
- **Cross-government communication:** communicating within government that this is a top priority ensures that child poverty is recognised as a whole-of-government issue across departments.
- **Chancellor's buy-in:** clear commitment from the Treasury is vital to ensure resources are secured for effective delivery, particularly where policy interventions are long term.

At the departmental level, interviewees highlighted that ministerial leadership is critical for creating the space to prioritise tackling child poverty. It was recognised that government departments are dealing with competing priorities and agendas, so commitment from ministers can help officials to prioritise policies that will reduce child poverty over other policy initiatives. In addition to ministers demonstrating support, it was seen as important that ministers take ownership so it is clear at a departmental level who is leading this work. As this quote highlights, where this is lacking, progress is unlikely to be made.

[In Northern Ireland] whenever you think about the leadership structures, that's one of the places where it specifically fell down. Because no one really took ownership of leading on the delivery of the strategy. No one department really said, "We're driving this forward, it's our responsibility, and we're going to make sure that these actions are taken, and that we deliver on these outcomes."

Some interviewees highlighted that successful leadership to deliver a strategy extends beyond politicians to the structure and seniority of officials. Within central government, it is important that overall responsibility and accountability for the strategy sits with civil servants who are sufficiently senior – Director General level was seen as appropriate. Having dedicated people within each department, and clear accountability chains through each department and across government departments, were also identified as key success factors.

Recommendations

- The Cabinet and ministers across departments should regularly articulate, both publicly and within government, that tackling child poverty is a government priority.
- The Secretaries of State with responsibility for leading the strategy should have a formal mechanism for maintaining oversight and driving strategy delivery across government (eg, a taskforce or committee that meets regularly with reporting requirements attached).
- Within departments, it should be clear which ministers and senior officials are responsible for delivering each aspect of the strategy, and accountability chains within and across government should be clear for officials working on strategy delivery.

Delivery and coordination

Interviewees were clear that where overall responsibility for the delivery of the strategy sits in government matters. There was consensus that a dedicated Child Poverty Unit should sit at the heart of government, either in No.10 or the Cabinet Office. Some felt strongly that having the unit in No.10 was important to give it authority within government.

While central government retains control of many critical policy levers that affect child poverty, such as social security, central government is not the delivery arm for many other aspects of a successful child poverty strategy. Housing, childcare, education, employment support, transport and many other services

that children and families interact with are delivered at a devolved or local level and may involve non-governmental organisations.

In this context, the task for central government is to establish structures that support these delivery bodies to tackle child poverty. This can be provided via funding, infrastructure, data and other forms of support (guidance, access to networks etc.) to enable these bodies to play their part.

The Scottish government doesn't deliver a lot of services. We ask other people to deliver for us. We set the outcomes. We provide the funding. We'll provide the structure and the enabling environment, but... the role of government is not necessarily to deliver a service always.

Central government should also articulate how the child poverty strategy aligns with the government's other strategies and priorities. Government officials with experience of delivering child poverty strategies highlighted that some read across between the child poverty strategy and other strategies can help identify shared aims which can help create buy-in.

I think the trick is to try and get people to understand that it's helpful to their own objectives at the same time.... To try and make it, as much as you can, feel like a shared problem and not just something that is the responsibility of whichever team has been set up to develop the strategy.

However, some interviewees were keen to underline that a list of existing policies without a measurable aim does not constitute a strategy. A major flaw in the previous Northern Ireland strategy was that it did not contain any specific new measures to tackle child poverty. Instead, it provided a list of existing interventions that related to children. Similar criticism was raised about the child poverty strategy in Wales.

The [Welsh] strategy brings together lots of activities that were already underway and already budgeted for, by the department. So when the strategy was developed, lots of the departments identified activities that were already budgeted for, and underway. And then they were subsumed within the strategy. There weren't any clear headline new developments or required budgeting.

The forthcoming UK strategy is being developed in the context of a mission-led government, and alongside a number of other strategies and reviews. This presents opportunities to progress long-term, coordinated policy interventions that will make a difference to child poverty, for example in housing or education. However, a careful balance will need to be struck to ensure the focus on child poverty doesn't get lost in this broader government agenda.

Recommendations

- The Child Poverty Unit should be based in the heart of government and given responsibility for supporting and coordinating action on child poverty across different levels of government. This should include:
 - Playing a co-ordinating role between devolved governments, to ensure dialogue on policy initiatives to tackle child poverty across the four nations.
 - Convening different government departments across Whitehall to ensure the strategy is genuinely cross-government.
 - Supporting government at a regional and local level in England to take an active role in strategy delivery.
- Central government should clearly articulate how the forthcoming child poverty strategy aligns with its missions and milestones. For example, reducing child poverty will be an essential part of reaching the school readiness milestone of the opportunity mission, and the living standards milestone of the growth mission.

Reporting

There was clear consensus among interviewees that some level of regular reporting is required to ensure the successful delivery of a strategy.

There were a mix of views on how regular this reporting should be and what it should look like. In Scotland, both central government and local government are legally required to produce annual progress reports. Some interviewees in Scotland felt this was the right frequency. Any less would allow child poverty to be ignored for long periods of time, whereas yearly reporting helps keep child poverty on the agenda and helps to show the public that progress is being made. Others felt that annual reports were quite onerous (particularly at a local government level), and three-yearly reports would allow for a more strategic approach. The new Welsh strategy sets out a three-yearly reporting cycle.

[In Wales] the three-year cycle that we have in place is really good because we get a year of reporting. We then get a couple of years of actually doing stuff, and then another year of reporting on progress.

An interviewee with experience of supporting local authorities to develop local child poverty plans in Scotland thought that producing three- or five-year plans accompanied by once-yearly progress updates was effective at creating space for a medium-term strategic approach, while satisfying their statutory duty to report annually.

The importance of linking any reporting obligations to targets, so progress can be clearly monitored, was made clear in our interviews. The experience of Northern Ireland illustrates how reporting requirements that fail to link to clear targets for poverty reduction will have little actual effect on child poverty.

The reporting on the strategy will only be effective if there are targets to report against. And that was where we fell down in Northern Ireland, was that essentially, every year, there was a report, but it just said, "Things are bad, we're doing the same things," and that was it.... Whereas if you have a target that you have to speak to each time, and you go, "Yeah, we're missing our target again," then you, as a department, might begin to have your minds focused a little. Or at least, hopefully, have the decency to be embarrassed about it.

In order to effectively measure progress, government officials must have access to the right data. Many of our interviewees highlighted gaps in data, particularly for groups that are most at risk of poverty, for example Black and minority ethnic families, and migrants and refugees. In one example from New Zealand, officials used the reporting requirements set out in their child poverty strategy to push for improvements in data collection.

That gave us the impetus/lever... to encourage our statistical agency Stats New Zealand to have the disability questions in their household economic survey so then we could measure that and also as part of that because we were so focused on measurement, we needed to increase the sample size of the sort of annual survey run by Stats New Zealand... in order to be able to report on child poverty by different ethnic groups and by different sort of regions. And so that was good.

Gaps in data were highlighted as a particular issue at a local government level, where sample sizes can become too small to effectively monitor progress on child poverty, and to understand who is most affected by poverty. Specific recommendations on improvements that could be made to data collection are outlined below.

Interviewees were clear that any reporting requirements must be resourced, and this is particularly critical at a local government level. There was a recognition that many local authorities are under serious financial pressure and struggling to deliver their statutory duties, so placing additional requirements on

local authorities without resources could be damaging and make it harder for central government to have the leverage it might need over how local government complies with requirements.

I think the Scottish approach has been very carrot-based partly because there's been no provision of funding. So, I think it might have not been great for local-national government relations for the Scottish government to be seen to be coming down heavily on local government when it's not providing funding for this new duty.

However, interviewees were also clear that local authorities are critical delivery partners, so some degree of reporting at this level of government is required to ensure that child poverty remains a focus. Reporting requirements at a local level are discussed in more detail in the section on working with local authorities.

Some interviewees highlighted that budgetary reporting was an important tool for ensuring progress is made on tackling child poverty by central government. This would require the Treasury to consider how a particular budget or fiscal event will affect child poverty and how it will help to deliver on commitments to tackle child poverty. This process was introduced in New Zealand under the previous administration and has helped to maintain a focus on child poverty and child wellbeing even after a change in government.

We amended the Public Finance Act to make the Minister of Finance report annually as part of the budget cycle on child poverty, what they've done for child poverty and how they're making an impact on the different measures that were explicit in the legislation.... That is a really powerful lever because it ensures that it has that focus every year.... We've had a bit of a change in government... [but] it's still there and we're still reporting and it's still being reported on.

Recommendations

- The UK government should publish annual progress reports on the action it is taking to tackle child poverty. These reports should be aligned with budgetary cycles and statements and demonstrate how the government's spending decisions are expected to affect child poverty.
- The government should invest in improving the quality of data on child poverty so that progress in reducing poverty can be monitored more effectively, particularly at a local level. Some of these changes could be implemented via existing commitments to improve local data set out in the recently published English Devolution White Paper.³ Key improvements include:
 - Increasing the response rate for some surveys.
 - Increasing the sample size – this is especially important for breakdowns of the overall poverty rate eg, at local/regional level, and among Black and minority ethnic families and migrant and refugee families.
 - Increasing the number of variables in publicly available data eg, the breakdown of childcare usage in the Family Resources Survey could tell us more about how families use childcare (hours, formal/informal, amount paid, subsidised schemes families are accessing).
 - Better linkage of government-held data – eg, linking education data with family income data would help inform future policy interventions.

Accountability

Interviewees were clear that robust accountability mechanisms are an essential part of effective strategy delivery. Routine reporting to Parliament on the actions taken as part of the child poverty strategy provides a means of ensuring that parliamentarians are up to date on implementation of the strategy,

³ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, [English Devolution White Paper](#), 2024

allows the opportunity to identify gaps or where a change of direction or speed of travel may be needed, and can be used to show the country what progress is being made and the impact this is having. Alongside parliamentary reporting, some interviewees identified the value of legislation and external analysis to ensure ongoing and effective action on child poverty.

Even though legislation on reducing child poverty can be overturned, interviewees argued that, if done early enough so it is given time to embed, it becomes accepted and ingrained as a way of working. In New Zealand, legislation helped child poverty reduction work endure after a change of government as it had become an established practice by the time of that leadership change (unlike the UK's Child Poverty Act, which was passed just before a change in administration). Interviewees emphasised the value of embedding binding targets and a reporting framework within legislation to sustain poverty reduction over multiple parliamentary terms.

Reporting is really important because it's a public thing. That's one of the pros of legislation. If you've got a legal commitment to produce a report on an annual basis or every two years or whatever, that makes sure it happens, whereas if there's just a strategy with something quite loose, a long time in the future, no articulated reporting mechanism, things can slip.

In addition, interviewees saw legislation as a valuable mechanism to demonstrate the government's intention to meaningfully reduce child poverty. Legislation is an important demonstration of the status of this work to the public and to government departments responsible for delivering it, and helps to ensure that government's political priorities are delivered by the civil service and partners in delivery. Interviewees talked about how placing a strategy on a statutory footing helps to ensure work to deliver that strategy is prioritised, in the context of competing priorities.

[Without legislation] it might just be seen as a minister saying, "It's very important to me".

Once Scotland had its own very clear Child Poverty Act strategy and requirements there was a step change in the level of focus.

In addition to leading to increased and sustained focus on child poverty within central government, legislation can create an impetus for all delivery partners to work together strategically. This has been the case in Scotland where legislation requires local authorities to work with health boards to produce local child poverty delivery plans, encouraging a more strategic approach at a local level. Annual reporting can also help to keep child poverty on the agenda throughout the policymaking and committee cycles of local government.

[Under New Labour, requiring local government reporting] made them see their work through the lens of child poverty. When you went to conferences at local government level, they were there with their slides showing what they were doing on child poverty, which is not a bad thing.

Interviewees agreed that there should be a mechanism through which the government's progress can be independently analysed and assessed. This is most commonly achieved through an independent body which reports on the government's progress. Establishing an independent body via legislation gives the body statutory responsibility and clout to advise the government on tackling child poverty.

In Scotland, as part of the Act, the Poverty and Inequality Commission was put on a statutory footing.... It existed, pre-Act, as an advisory commission, but it's now a statutory commission with a statutory responsibility to advise Scottish government on progress against the child poverty targets.... The commission's role of giving an independent view of how we're faring is really important.

Finally, some interviewees highlighted the value of some read across between the strategy and the UN convention on the right of the child (UNCRC), as the strategy will be critical for realising many of the rights set out in the convention, and doing so would allow for more coherent monitoring and reporting of the UNCRC in the UK as a whole.

Recommendations

- The strategy should include:
 - Binding targets to reduce child poverty.
 - A reporting framework at different levels of government, including reporting to Parliament and at each Budget.
 - The commitment to establish an independent monitoring body with the statutory duty to advise the government on how to reduce child poverty.
- Legislation should be passed that requires the government to reduce child poverty until the point of eradication is reached, and should include the accountability features listed above.

Working across different levels of government

The structure and fiscal arrangements for devolved governments and local authorities have moved considerable policymaking power closer to local areas since the UK last had a comprehensive strategy to end child poverty. As a result, devolved nations and local areas will be vital delivery partners in the successful implementation of the forthcoming UK-wide child poverty strategy, but this delivery framework will need to take account of these changes to devolution.

In the absence of action on child poverty from the UK government in recent years, decisions about how to address child poverty have been made at a local or devolved level. Some English local authorities have developed child poverty strategies or action plans independent of Westminster. Scotland and Wales both have child poverty strategies in place linked to nation-specific legislation that puts obligations on local authorities. Northern Ireland is currently developing a new anti-poverty strategy that will contain actions to address child poverty at a national and local level.

However, Westminster retains control of the most significant policy levers for reducing child poverty, in particular the majority of the social security system. Even in areas where policymaking is fully devolved, UK government policy can have a profound impact on the local delivery of services and families' experiences of using them. For example, the housing options available to low-income families across the UK are affected by Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) policies (such as the housing element of universal credit). Similarly, many families rely on universal credit to help them meet the cost of childcare, including to fill gaps in the funded provision in their local area. The result is a deeply intertwined policy framework, and the challenge for the UK government is to design a strategy that ensures that the various levels of government are working together effectively to tackle child poverty.

Our interviewees recognised that a UK-wide child poverty strategy will struggle to achieve its aims without effective collaboration and co-operation between Westminster and the UK nations, regions and local authority areas. For a UK-wide strategy to be fully effective, it will have to strike the right balance between providing leadership, respecting the existing priorities of devolved administrations (and, where relevant, existing child poverty strategies), and empowering local areas to take action on the services that support families to move out of poverty – such as education, childcare, health, employment support, transport and housing.

What we wouldn't wish to see was a UK [child poverty] strategy that doesn't take account of the devolution settlement, which was written in a way... as if it applies to the whole of the UK. So if we had an education section, that wouldn't be relevant to us in Wales, as it wouldn't be to Scotland; we've got our own section, our own laws around education.

Interviewees felt that the UK government's role is to provide leadership and to set out a shared vision of how child poverty will be ended in every part of the UK, as well as to identify the policy actions within the competence of the UK government that it intends to take to meet child poverty reduction and elimination targets.

There was a clear consensus among our interviewees that child poverty strategies need visible leadership along with an explicit map of where responsibility for different aspects of delivery rests. The strategy will need to acknowledge that local authorities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland bear different duties around child poverty, and local and regional government in England will require separate direction that sets out the UK government's chosen approach in the policy areas it reserves control of in England (devolution in England is discussed further below).

The challenge is that any policy has to be sensitive to devolution but also has to address the needs of England.... That strategy has to accommodate specific challenges in relation to England, provide for specific processes, structures, to implement the strategy in England.

Interviewees recommended that, where the strategy seeks to compare progress across the nations and regions, care must be taken to select measures that have a uniform definition and reporting schedule in each nation. For example, the 'attainment gap' between children eligible for free school meals (FSMs) and their peers differs between nations due to the variation in FSM eligibility criteria and the curriculum and qualification frameworks in each nation.

The UK government should define its own role in eliminating child poverty and must clearly set out the actions it will take to achieve this aim in both the short and long term. Interviewees were unanimous that the most significant action the UK government can take to tackle child poverty is to invest in the social security system, as this will provide the foundation for further policy interventions at a devolved and local level. Abolishing the two-child limit and the benefit cap were seen as priorities for child poverty reduction, as the existing mitigations in parts of the UK pose significant costs to devolved governments.

We will forever be plugging gaps in national policy and the potential of devolution will be held back as long as things like the two-child limit and the benefit cap remain in place. Any action that's taken at a local level isn't going to be able to mitigate fully against those big poverty producing policies.

[In England] the big-ticket items that are really going to make a difference aren't sitting with local government at the moment, they're sitting with national government.

In addition to investing in social security, interviewees were clear that the UK government should set out a longer-term vision and establish a robust framework (with consistent definitions, measurement and data) which existing strategies at a devolved level can work alongside. Because every nation is at a different point in its policymaking cycle regarding child poverty, a longer-term vision will allow alignment between future iterations of devolved and local child poverty strategies and the objectives of the UK mission.

The question for me is how does a [UK-wide] strategy fit with devolved work? There's been a lot of effort gone into this at local level... local areas can't feel that it's being scrapped to start again.

Recommendations

- The strategy must contain an overarching vision for reducing and eliminating poverty across the UK. It should clearly outline what the Westminster government will do to support this aim at a strategic level, and how this will work in tandem with poverty reduction strategies and policies that are being led by devolved governments.
- The Child Poverty Unit should support governments at all levels to play a role in delivering the strategy (see section above on delivery and co-ordination). This should include regular dialogue with devolved governments to ensure alignment on key issues such as definitions, measurement, data and targets.
- The strategy should contain specific policies that invest in the social security system, as the main policy lever that Westminster can pull to tackle child poverty across the UK.

Supporting local government

In general, interviewees did not support the UK child poverty strategy being used to mandate specific action by local authorities in the devolved nations, as this impinges on devolved responsibilities. Scotland and Wales are already using their own child poverty strategies to establish reporting frameworks and to provide support and guidance to local authorities. Both have a statutory requirement for public bodies to report on local action to address child poverty.

Some English regions and local government areas are already undertaking strategic action to reduce child poverty. However, only 13 per cent of English local authorities currently have an anti-poverty strategy in place, and interviewees felt there is a need for a more co-ordinated approach that sets out how national priorities can be supported and delivered at a local level within England.

In the previous UK strategy, this took the form of local child poverty plans, a model that is used in Scotland and Wales. Some interviewees were keen to resurrect this in England, however there was an acknowledgement that devolution in England looks very different from when the last UK-wide strategy was delivered, and this would need to be taken into account in any duties that are passed down to local government.

Interviewees also cautioned that applying additional duties without extra funding is likely to lead to little change. After severe funding cuts, councils in England now vary widely in their effectiveness and capacity to undertake strategic work. Increasing costs and continued funding pressures mean many are in firefighting mode.

My feeling at the moment is [English] local government has fairly few levers to do anything in this space. They've got no money and they're completely focused on delivering their statutory duties so there's no space to do anything that isn't statutory. So asking them to do something else without giving them any money just seems like a bad idea that will just hit a very vulnerable system even harder.

However, despite a changed landscape (in terms of devolution) and a challenging fiscal context, there was recognition that local government will play a critical role in the delivery of an effective UK-wide child poverty strategy. Regional working has much untapped potential in England, and the Mayor of London and Mayor of the North East were cited as examples of the potential for English regions to deliver significant action to ameliorate child poverty in local areas. With plans to ensure universal coverage of strategic (combined) authorities in England, as set out in the English Devolution Paper,⁴ English regions

⁴ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, [English Devolution White Paper](#), 2024

could be empowered to tackle child poverty using the powers and resources devolved to them from national government.

In terms of what local policymaking on child poverty in England looks like, interviewees were in general agreement that local government is often best placed to carry out meaningful engagement with communities, and could apply this knowledge to develop effective, targeted local interventions grounded in the specific needs of local families. Interviewees recognised that using participatory approaches that involved children and their families in developing local child poverty plans could help reduce the social exclusion that is an integral part of life below the poverty line. Children and families can be involved at all stages of the policymaking process, from determining strategic priorities, to budgeting, to assessing impact and evaluating outcomes. Further discussion of the role of people with lived experience is outlined in the next section.

Some of the work we do around children's rights suggests where a strategy is sensitive to the need to consult with particular groups, to take their views into account, to embed their experiences and their contributions through formal processes, such as impact assessments, child rights impact assessment, for example, it has a benefit. It doesn't alleviate the poverty that they're living in, but it gives them a sense that their needs are being addressed. In some instances, it can lead to changes which can lead to improvement. It doesn't lead to an end to poverty, but it mitigates the harsh experience of poverty for certain groups.

Interviewees also highlighted the way regional and local policymaking can focus on specific poverty-related barriers that are more prevalent in some areas than others, for example access to transport.

I think there's something really important that can be done at regional level, which really responds to local needs. There was a lot of discussion around things like transport, which is a really big issue here in the North East that maybe... doesn't feature quite in the same way as if you live somewhere like London. It's much more expensive to get round. We've got quite rural counties here and I think decisions about that probably are best led by local government.

There was strong consensus that, in addition to adequate funding, local government at all levels should receive guidance on the most effective ways to alleviate poverty at a local level and be supported to produce and deliver a collaborative work programme.

I think the challenge we have, with local authorities and other bodies, is simply time, resource and funding to engage in the sort of activities they want to do outside of the day job. This whole engaging and collaborating thing takes time and resource, and I think we're finding some organisations are struggling to achieve that.

Scotland has made significant progress in supporting local authorities to produce strategic child poverty action plans that align with national priorities. Interviewees noted that most local authorities warmly welcomed the offer of peer-to-peer support, best practice sharing and non-statutory guidance on the most effective action to take.

The child poverty strategy in Scotland also specifies six priority family types that are at the highest risk of poverty.⁵ One interviewee with experience of working with local authorities to develop local child poverty plans spoke about how this was helpful at a local government level. It enabled decision makers with less expertise on child poverty to develop effective child poverty plans and interventions that could be delivered locally.

⁵ Scottish government, [Tackling child poverty priority families overview](#), 2021

What has been really helpful in the whole approach to tackling child poverty in Scotland has been the priority groups.... I think it's been a useful tool in terms of understanding, of just being really granular in terms of, if you're not someone that works in poverty and you want to think about child poverty, if you're not reaching these families, you're probably not addressing child poverty.

Other interviewees identified that many of the successes from the UK-wide child poverty strategy at the turn of the millennium came about because they fostered partnership working around a shared goal. Local agencies were able to come together and work collaboratively to improve the lives of children in every community.

[The UK child poverty strategy and targeted funding] meant that social services, schools, nurseries, Sure Start, all of these locally-delivered services for children had shared objectives, and they started every meeting with, "Let's just remind ourselves of our objectives: reducing child poverty, getting parents into work, improving literacy," you know, they were shared across local and national government. And everybody loved it – it really stopped people working in silos.

Local government is often the intermediary between central government and the children, young people and families who stand to benefit from collective efforts to eradicate child poverty. Interviewees highlighted that that local government can play a role in monitoring the UK child poverty strategy, allowing policymakers at every level to see the emerging positive impacts of the strategy, before longer-term outcomes become available in official statistics.

There's been a lot of work around trying to develop indicators at a local level that would give a sense of where you're moving in the right direction, even if child poverty is going up, as counterintuitive as that might seem.

Hate the phrase 'lived experience', but it's the best one we've got for these circumstances. It's very easy for us to forget that this is real people in communities, who are living with the impact of decisions that we all make. Do we understand that impact? Are we making those decisions in the best way, and are we communicating clearly enough to people?

Recommendations

- Strategic authorities in England (and local authorities, until they become part of a strategic authority) should be required to produce child poverty plans for their areas to drive local action to tackle child poverty.
- Local government must be resourced to implement and monitor local child poverty plans.
- Central government should provide guidance and support to local areas on developing local child poverty plans and on how their progress can be monitored (see Appendix 1 for suggestions of possible indicators).

Engaging people with lived experience

Interviewees recognised the value that engaging families on a low income can add to the development and implementation of a child poverty strategy. It was seen as an essential process to understand what the strategy should include and the impact the strategy has on families.

In Scotland, we noted that youth engagement in particular revealed specific concerns (eg, food security, housing) that in turn shaped the development of a child poverty strategy.

Engaging people with lived experience ensures that the voices and views of individuals and communities, especially those most impacted by decisions, are central to policymaking. Interviewees recognised that it is vital that it is not just the experience that is heard, but proposals for change; and that policy discussions about solutions include people with lived experience.

Interviewees emphasised the need for government to recognise the value of this work and create a space for it, even when there is pressure to minimise costs as this pressure can lead to more generic, top-down solutions. They acknowledged that listening to people and using their input to shape and reshape strategies requires a lot of effort. However, it was seen as necessary for creating policies that genuinely reflect and address the needs of those affected by poverty. Engaging people with lived experience can also provide the government with an early indication of the impact that the strategy is having on families as official statistics inevitably entail a time-lag.

Drawing on existing best practice will ensure that time spent engaging people with lived experience will yield rich and actionable insights. For example, Changing Realities has developed a nationwide profile documenting life on a low income for parents, and being part of change-based conversations. There are also existing networks of young people to speak to. Save the Children UK and CPAG have groups that have been established so that policy makers can hear directly from young people about the change they want to see. There is scope to work directly with these groups and bring them into policymaking spaces, rather than creating a new initiative or panel at each policy engagement point.

Local partners and third sector organisations can offer insights on and access to specific communities. For example, in Fife, collaboration with Fife Gingerbread and One Parent Families Scotland was key to co-producing child poverty plans and reports. But it is important to recognise that working with organisations that represent marginalised groups is not a substitute for hearing the unfiltered voices of individuals.

While developing a Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy in New Zealand, it became clear that youth had different needs from younger children. Engaging youth directly helped refine the strategy to focus on autonomy, empowerment and respect – key pillars for youth wellbeing.

When engaging families on a low income in the development and implementation of the strategy, interviewees emphasised the need to shift power dynamics. When people with lived experiences of poverty are brought together with policymakers there are deep and ingrained power differentials at play. It is important to be transparent about these differentials and work creatively to soften them to allow for an open dialogue between all participants.

Lastly, interviewees emphasised the need to create feedback loops with people with lived experience of poverty throughout the duration of the strategy. At an individual level, this involves informing those directly engaged in the process about how their insights have influenced government actions. At a system level, this involves establishing mechanisms to continually seek feedback from people with lived experience on the delivery of the strategy. One way that Scotland does this is through the establishment of an 'Experts by Experience Panel' within the Poverty and Inequality Commission who advise and scrutinise the Scottish government's progress on reducing child poverty.

Recommendations

- Children and families with lived experience of poverty should be involved in the development, implementation and monitoring of the forthcoming strategy.
- This should be at all levels of government, for example an independent monitoring body could have lived experience representation embedded, and local government could be required to involve people with lived experience in their work to develop, deliver and monitor local child poverty plans.

Section 2: what are the priority policies for a child poverty strategy?

A UK-wide child poverty strategy must be truly cross-government, pulling the various policy levers to lift children and families out of poverty, and mitigate the effects of poverty. A good cross-government strategy should include policy change in the following areas:

- Social security
- Employment
- Education
- Housing
- Childcare
- Health and other services for children and families

It is important to note that some areas are more critical than others. The primary aim of a child poverty strategy should be to increase family income, and investing in the social security system is the most effective way to do this.

CPAG and Save the Children interviewed 20 practitioners with expertise in the policy areas outlined above. Interviewees were asked about the two or three priority policies they would like to see included in the forthcoming strategy. The next section provides a summary of the key areas identified by interviewees, which was reinforced by our existing evidence and expertise.

It is important to note that the policy recommendations below should not be read as a blueprint for a whole strategy. Instead, they are a starting point. If the strategy is to deliver the change needed to transform the lives of children and families in poverty, it will require government to take action on a range of other policy areas that affect children's and families' lives, from parental leave right through to the support that is available to young people as they transition into adulthood.

Social security

Social security is the primary policy lever governments can pull to tackle child poverty, and cuts to social security over the last 15 years have been a key driver of rising child poverty in the UK. The most urgent policy recommendations highlighted by interviewees for inclusion in the strategy related, without exception, to social security. This mirrors CPAG's analysis of the changes that will have the most effect on child poverty. Given the critical equation that child poverty results from the additional costs of having children that cannot necessarily be matched by income from work, social security is much more than a short-term response to child poverty. It is, and always will be, an essential part of the support that some families need to get through a significant but temporary period of their lives when costs are higher. A common theme to the interviews was that policies to tackle child poverty in education, services, housing etc. would have limited effectiveness if the underlying issue of an inadequate social security system is not addressed.

Scrap the two-child limit

The most urgent priority for most interviewees was scrapping the two-child limit. Respondents gave several reasons why scrapping this policy should be the top priority, noting that the rise in (relative after housing costs) child poverty from 3.6 million in 2010/11 to 4.3 million in 2022/23 (latest figures) was almost exclusively concentrated in larger families. This is a result of general cuts to social security affecting larger families more, but also the impact of the two-child limit. This is not just historic: the continued roll-out of the two-child limit will be the key driver of rising child poverty in the coming years and over this Parliament.

If the two-child limit isn't scrapped, then I don't think that the child poverty strategy can be taken seriously by people in government and outside of government.

Scrapping the two-child limit is also the most cost-effective way of reducing child poverty, a finding supported by economic modelling from a variety of organisations. There was also agreement that increasing social security entitlement, in a general sense, was more cost-effective than other policies, such as employment reforms, which can often have marginal impacts on child poverty rates.

Our research that we've done showed that just in terms of cost per child brought out of poverty, scrapping the two-child limit is by far the most effective measure.

Interviewees also highlighted that the two-child limit is a particularly bad policy as it removes the link between entitlement and need. It is an important principle that entitlement – even where the baseline rate is too low – relates to the relative additional needs of a household. This is not the case with the two-child limit (or the benefit cap, discussed below), where regardless of this additional objective cost, families receive nothing more for third or subsequent children.

Scrap the benefit cap

Interviewees highlighted that pulling children out of poverty per se should not be the sole focus of a child poverty strategy. The strategy must also pay attention to the depth of poverty that families face. The benefit cap is a particularly acute example, where scrapping the policy would not change headline poverty levels that much, but would substantially reduce the depth of poverty for affected families.

If the government abolished the benefit cap, it would lift very few children out of poverty. Because the children affected by the benefit cap are really far below the poverty line, [scrapping the cap] would mean a very significant income boost, but would take them from very deep poverty to much shallower poverty.

Interviewees also highlighted the interaction between the two-child limit and the benefit cap. If the two-child limit were removed, with the benefit cap still in place, some households would see no increase in income and others would only partially benefit, as they would be newly affected by the benefit cap. Therefore, it makes most sense to remove both policies at once, especially if the government cares about poverty depth as well as the headline poverty rate. But removing just one of the policies would still have a large impact.

Some research that we did earlier this year [shows] that poverty depth has got deeper over the last 10 years, which tracks quite well with the adequacy of benefits falling down and the introduction of these kind of policies that break that link between entitlement and need.

The benefit cap is another policy which removes the link between entitlement and need. It is set at an arbitrary threshold, which penalises households who live in high-cost rental areas, private renters and those with higher needs (eg, families with children). It disproportionately affects single-parent families who experience significant barriers to work, effectively trapping them in deep poverty as working (more) is the only way to escape the cap. Single parents are the least able to work more hours.

Invest in the social security system, and increase access for families excluded

Children and families have been neglected by government over the past 15 years – with austerity cuts targeted at families, the needs of children ignored during Covid, and a lack of financial support to help with the additional costs of children during the cost-of-living crisis. The two-child limit and benefit cap are two of the most damaging policies from this period and must be removed to give government any chance of reducing the trajectory of child poverty. But beyond that there are additional steps to improve support for families within the social security system.

The value of child benefit

A simple way to get money to low- and middle-income families, and make up for some of these losses over time, is to increase the value of child benefit. Investing in child benefit shores up household finances for over 7 million households – reducing child poverty and providing increased economic security and improved living standards for almost all families. Child benefit is also extremely effective at reaching families, because of its simplicity, predictability and near universality.

Investing in social security more widely

Interviewees were keen to highlight that it is not just child-related benefits which are inadequate: the adequacy of social security needs to increase across the board. Particularly inadequate areas are local housing allowance (LHA), the standard allowance of universal credit (UC), disability benefits, carers allowance, statutory sick pay and local crisis support.

Benefit rates are just way lower than they should be. Ignoring the fiscal reality, I think we would raise them straight away. But we've advocated before for linking benefit uprating to earnings rather than CPI as a way to slowly bring up the level of adequacy.

There was less consensus on how much social security levels should rise and over what timeframe. Interviewees generally favoured large increases to social security, but were aware that fiscal constraints meant this may not happen overnight. One option given was to uprate benefit levels by more than CPI year-on-year to reach a longer-term goal of increasing the value of benefits. Another option is to introduce a 'child lock', advocated by Save the Children UK and others, which would make it a statutory requirement to increase children's benefits by inflation or earnings, whichever is highest.

Any further cuts to social security, such as those proposed by government in relation to disability benefits, risk pushing more children into poverty, and will undermine the objectives of the child poverty strategy.

System design

In addition to increasing the adequacy of social security, the government has a significant opportunity to improve the design and functioning of the UC system. This includes making improvements to the claim system and how people manage awards, and making sure UC supports people into work and to work more. By the time UC is fully rolled out, over half of children in the UK will be living in a family that claims UC. Getting this system right promises to improve the lives and life chances of all those children. Delivering a reliable and stable income through UC should be a key goal. CPAG's three-step plan to reform UC sets out priorities for change that were largely echoed in interviews and in outputs from other organisations, and UC change is an area where engagement with families on a low income would be particularly valuable.⁶

Increasing access

The government must also ensure families most at risk of poverty are able to access the social security system. This is a particular issue for migrants and refugees, many of whom are currently excluded from accessing support. As a minimum, the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) condition must be abolished for families with children.

The child maintenance system

The child maintenance system is an important source of income for many families living in poverty. Child maintenance alone cannot lift these households out of poverty, and it should not be seen as a substitute for social security, but it can go a long way to boosting the living standards of families. Further action is needed by government to support people in the initial stages of establishing an arrangement to make

⁶ CPAG, [Universal credit: A three-step plan](#), 2024

sure any family-based arrangements are workable and long lasting. Failure to pay child maintenance, underpayment and delays in payment are particularly problematic for families living in poverty as they need every penny they can get, and cannot afford to wait months to receive support.

Recommendations

- Scrap the two-child limit as the most cost-effective way of reducing child poverty.
- Abolish the benefit cap to substantially reduce the depth of poverty for affected children.
- Address the inadequate levels of social security by increasing benefits more widely.
- Once benefit levels have increased, the value of benefits must be maintained in the longer term through regular uprating.
- Change the way that UC is administered to offer parents stability and support to move into work when they are able to.
- Abolish the NRPF condition for families with children which prevents them from accessing support if they need it.
- Support parents to establish and maintain timely payments through the child maintenance system.

Employment

Employment is a vital component of any meaningful strategy to address child poverty, but on its own it is not sufficient to lift families out of poverty. The past 15 years can be characterised by falling unemployment, but also a large rise in in-work poverty, as out-of-work parents were pushed into low-paid, precarious work, while cuts to social security affected both in-work and out-of-work low-income families. Increasing the adequacy of social security is therefore very important in reversing the trend of rising in-work poverty, but there are some employment reforms that could be included in the strategy that would have a positive impact for families living in poverty.

The most urgent priority for interviewees we spoke to, as part of both this research and in roundtables organised to support the government's development of the strategy, was reforming the relationship between UC and the labour market. They were clear that, at the moment, there is far too much stick and not enough carrot. People are pigeonholed into strict conditionality groups, where they are deemed fit or not fit to work, and there is little recognition in the system of the complex barriers to work that people face, such as a lack of childcare, fluctuating health needs or skills barriers.

Interviewees were of the view that the current system needs reform from both sides. Removing the parts of the system that place unfair requirements on claimants, without any evidence of these requirements improving labour market outcomes, was seen as important. As was providing better employment support to claimants, to enable parents to overcome the multiple barriers they face in trying to enter (better) work. In addition, reforming work incentives in the social security system would help ensure parents are rewarded for moving into employment, seeking to progress at work, or working more hours. Security and stability of income once in work is also key.

Reform conditionality

The conditionality regime is currently set up to pigeonhole people into two groups. Those who are 'fit to work' are forced to find work as quickly as possible, through financial penalties and onerous search requirements, without any consideration given to the quality of work or the barriers they may face in finding work. This work, when found, is often precarious, low-paid, low-hours work with little chance of career progression. Once in work, there is no support to help parents find better work or progress in their career. There are then those who are 'unfit to work', who are largely ignored. Many people in this group would like to work, if given support to find suitable employment, but fear losing social security entitlement

if they are deemed 'fit to work'. There are of course some people whose health will not permit them to work and it's essential this doesn't cast their families into poverty.

Interviewees highlighted how this system creates a culture of fear and distrust. In particular, the benefit cap (which is supposed to act as a work incentive) and sanctions, which take money away from claimants in their time of need, are particularly detrimental. Neither of these policies has been shown to have a beneficial impact on the labour market, instead they just push families into deeper poverty, worsen mental health, and damage the relationship between claimants and the DWP.

Claimants shouldn't fear going to the job centre. Instead, the claimant and the department need to work together for a mutually beneficial relationship, not just a tick-box exercise.

The particularly urgent priority for interviewees was to remove egregious financial penalties such as the benefit cap and sanctions. This would be the first step to growing trust between claimants and the DWP, which is needed for a mutually beneficial relationship. Interviewees were still supportive of some form of conditionality, however they advocated for a co-produced claimant commitment that is designed by the claimant and the DWP, which would lead to a more productive, balanced relationship from the outset.

Reform employment support for parents and carers

The current approach to employment support is one size fits all and focuses on getting people into any job, regardless of their household circumstances, qualifications and aspirations.

Interviewees were clear, as were the findings from CPAG's own research project, *Your Work Your Way*,⁷ that a more individually tailored approach that focuses on helping parents overcome their substantial barriers to work would be more beneficial. Interviewees were keen to highlight that there is a strong evidence base supporting this approach. The New Deal for Lone Parents took this approach and was evaluated to be more effective than other forms of employment support.

I would focus on employment support for single parents. Three-quarters of the households with children on universal credit are single parents and there's good evidence from the New Deal for Lone Parents, a targeted employment active labour market programme specifically for lone parents that was evaluated and had good outcomes.

In addition to tailored support for parents, there should be more of a focus on helping parents find good quality work that matches their career aspirations, and this support should be available to those in and out of work.

Interviewees also highlighted that to support this to happen in practice, a DWP culture shift away from the current mentality of getting people into any form of work would be required. There may be opportunities to enact some of these changes via the Employment White Paper, published by the government in October 2024. Ensuring some read across between the child poverty strategy and the white paper would help to ensure that employment reforms benefit parents and carers, and therefore contribute to reducing child poverty and delivering a successful strategy.

Strengthen employment rights and family friendly policies

The current Employment Rights Bill takes a big first step in providing employees with basic rights. Reforms to hiring and firing practices, trade union rights, and zero-hours contracts among other things will make a big difference to low-income families. However, interviewees thought that there were gaps in the Bill that should be addressed. One area identified was the adequacy of universal benefits such as sick pay and maternity pay.

⁷ CPAG, [Your Work Your Way](#), 2024

One of the gaps [in the Bill] is increasing the basic rate of statutory sick pay, which is one of the lowest in the OECD. We saw through Covid just how damaging that can be in terms of public health. The Employment Rights Bill is doing various things on sick pay, but it's not touching the basic rate.

The Bill also includes family friendly provisions that give workers day one rights to unpaid bereavement leave and unpaid parental leave. These are welcome changes, but they will be meaningless rights to many low-income families who will not be able to afford to take unpaid time away from work. In order to create a society that truly respects family life and supports parents to spend time with their children, whatever their income bracket, entitlements to time off need to be paid, and payment levels must be improved.

Reform work incentives in social security

Interviewees highlighted that the incentives in social security for working (more) are too weak. This is a particularly acute problem for households with children, where one pay cheque can only go so far in covering the costs of multiple people. In addition, families face the additional costs of childcare (covered in more detail below).

There was less consensus on how to reform work incentives in social security, although some interviewees were keen to point out that work incentives are a particular issue for second earners in couples. As there is no second earner work allowance in UC, from the first £1 a second earner earns, 55p is lost in reduced UC, whereas primary earners can earn a small amount before they start losing their UC entitlement. When combined with childcare costs and taxes, the financial return from work for second earners can be incredibly low. Introducing a second earner work allowance in UC would help address this problem for low-income couple families.

Interviewees recognised that large increases in the minimum wage over recent years had helped many low-paid workers, but thought this was badly targeted towards child poverty for several reasons. Firstly, low hours are a more central issue driving child poverty, rather than low pay. Parents struggle to find jobs with sufficient hours due to a lack of available jobs, a lack of employment support and the cost of childcare if they work (more). Secondly, minimum wage-earning households on UC only fractionally benefit from rises in the minimum wage, as they lose out due to the taper rate. Thirdly, many minimum wage workers are second earners in better-off households, who do not need additional income as much as low-income families.

Recommendations

- Reform the conditionality and sanctions regime to build trust with claimants and prevent extreme hardship by cutting a family's support even further.
- Reform employment support services to help parents overcome barriers to work and find secure and sustainable jobs.
- Improve the incentive for parents to increase their earnings, for example by introducing a second earner work allowance in UC.
- Strengthen existing provisions in the Employment Rights Bill to ensure entitlements are paid, and payment levels are adequate, to ensure low-income parents can use them.

Education

There are things then within the school day that compound poverty, rather than alleviate it. So actually when children are in school, there are things that make that poverty feel worse.

There is strong agreement across the education sector and with interviewees that investing in social security is by far the most effective way to lift children out of poverty and help them get on at school. However, education policy in England should also be a vital component of the child poverty strategy, as it should be in devolved nations' child poverty strategies. School is where most children spend a significant portion of their time, learning and developing. Time at school is formative, affecting childhoods and children's life chances.

For these reasons, CPAG has a large programme of work dedicated to understanding how poverty affects school life and what changes are needed to remove financial barriers to education across the UK. This includes extensive research with children and families, analysis of education policies and school costs, and convening the education sector on issues related to child poverty. Our recommendations for education draw heavily on CPAG's research in this area but are reinforced by our interviews as part of this child poverty strategy research.

CPAG estimates that going to school costs families of primary school children at least £864 per year per child (before childcare costs) and at least £1,755 for secondary-aged children.⁸ Urgent action is needed to reduce the cost of the school day. This includes extending eligibility for free school meals (FSMs) to children living in low-income households, improving grants for education essentials such as school uniforms, ensuring that costs and charges are kept to a minimum, and making before- and after-school and holiday provision available to all families.

Expand FSM eligibility and automatically enrol eligible families

Addressing FSM eligibility was a key priority for our interviewees and features heavily in CPAG's own research with families. FSM policy and eligibility varies across the UK, but in all nations children in poverty are missing out on this entitlement. In England, poverty at home is being compounded in schools by a highly stringent FSM eligibility threshold (£7,400 after tax and before benefits). This threshold has not been updated since 2018, and CPAG estimates it leaves 900,000 school-age children in poverty in England ineligible for FSMs, as well as missing out on the other associated benefits.⁹ Department for Education (DfE) data also suggests that around one in 10 children who are eligible for FSMs is missing out because they are not registered to receive them.¹⁰ A national auto-enrolment system developed and implemented by the DfE and DWP is needed.

In a recent evaluation of the Mayor of London's universal primary FSMs programme, CPAG found that providing FSMs to all children greatly helped household finances; freed up money that was then spent on items for children such as school clubs; improved home-school relations by addressing dinner money debt; removed the additional stress of making and managing school meals in the mornings; and supported children's time at school. The introduction of the policy has been welcomed by families across the income spectrum, but families on lower incomes are benefiting the most and were more likely to say the policy was significantly helping household budgets.¹¹

Evidence from elsewhere shows that universal FSMs can help boost children's learning and attainment,¹² as well as supporting their health through providing a balanced meal each day.¹³ Children also benefit from the social experience of sitting down together in a shared dining hall and eating the same food.¹⁴ FSM eligibility in England must be urgently expanded to support more families on a lower income. At a minimum this should include all families in receipt of UC. However, the government should be working

⁸ CPAG and Loughborough University, [The minimum cost of education](#), 2023

⁹ CPAG, [New official data shows 900,000 children in poverty don't qualify for free school meals under national policy](#), 2024

¹⁰ Department for Education, [Pupils not claiming Free School Meals - 2013](#), 2013

¹¹ Impact on Urban Health, [More than a Meal](#), 2024

¹² Lund University, [Free and nutritious school lunches help create richer and healthier adults](#), 2021

¹³ Nuffield Foundation, [Impact of the universal infant free school meal policy](#), 2020

¹⁴ Education Policy Institute, [Evaluation of Universal Infant Free School Meals](#), 2018

towards removing means-testing entirely from the dinner hall. CPAG estimates that rolling out universal FSMs in England would cost £2 billion.

Reduce the cost of the school day including through uniform grants

CPAG's research in education highlights the hidden cost of schooling and the impact this has on children and families. Interviewees were also concerned about the cost barriers to education and supported policies to reduce or remove these costs. School uniform and kit is the largest school cost for families and yet, unlike elsewhere in the UK, struggling families in England receive no national support with this cost. CPAG analysis finds that parents of primary school children are paying at a minimum £352.86 per year for uniform and P.E. kit, and parents of secondary school children are paying a minimum of £481.77 per year.¹⁵ Grants should be made available to families struggling with the cost of school uniform and P.E. kit, as they are in Scotland. School uniform costs and requirements also affect school attendance and must be addressed. Research from the DfE shows 18 per cent of children from households facing financial hardship were sent home from school in 2023 due to uniform requirements.¹⁶ The Behaviour in Schools guidance should be updated so that children are not sanctioned for income-related issues, such as not meeting uniform requirements.

Curriculum-related costs can also prevent children taking part in lessons and learning.¹⁷ In secondary school, our research found that families spend a minimum of £279 on resources and equipment to take part in the curriculum. This includes laptops and revision guides, and costs for specific subjects eg, materials for design technology, specific P.E. kit or ingredients for food technology. The current guidance on charging for school-related activities and trips in England results in costs landing on families and deepens disparities in schools. The Charging for School Activities guidance should be reviewed and reformed, so children do not have to pay to take part in subjects and curriculum-related activities.

Before- and after-school provision and holiday programmes help to maximise the poverty-reducing potential of schools. They enable parents and carers to work, and high-quality school-based provision can help children from lower-income households to access enriching experiences that are not covered in the curriculum. The government should invest further in before- and after-school childcare provision and holiday clubs. Breakfast clubs are a welcome start. But wider provision around the school day from 8am to 6pm is needed, as well as during the school holidays.

[Children in poverty] just want ordinary school experiences, the same as their peers. To be able to take part in those things that they're told going to school is about – which is lessons and learning, but also the fun social side of being at school. Being able to join in with other children of a similar age. Being able to [enjoy] trips and clubs really features very heavily when we ask children about these things. But so does taking part in theme days and end of year celebrations – reaching those childhood milestones in the same way as their friends.

Supporting children who face additional barriers to escaping poverty

Interviewees recommended that the UK government does more to uphold the rights of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to access education and childcare. Children with SEND are often doubly disadvantaged due to challenges around accessing education, the possibility of additional costs, and the impact of poverty at home, often made deeper because parents are less able to work.

While legislation exists to ensure children with SEND receive education and support tailored to their needs, in reality many children and their families do not currently get the help they are entitled to which is

¹⁵ CPAG and Loughborough University, [The minimum cost of education](#), 2023

¹⁶ Department for Education, [Cost of school uniforms survey 2023](#), 2024

¹⁷ CPAG, [The Cost of the School Day in England: Pupil's Perspectives](#), 2022

affecting children's outcomes. This includes access to accessible childcare places that wrap around school provision and allow parents to work.

This is a complex area, and many feel significant reform is needed to support children's outcomes and create a financially sustainable plan for provision. But interviewees were clear that the UK government should ensure that local government has the resources to meet the needs of every disabled child and their family, and that childcare providers are supported to make their settings accessible for disabled children.

It becomes much worse, as I say, for those parents who have not been able to find an appropriate school place or a school placement has broken down.... The rate of increase in home education has been dramatic over recent years. It's called elective home education in the jargon but it's really not elective home education, it's last resort home education because placements are breaking down. Children are, basically, struggling in school or refusing to go to school because of the impact on their mental health and them not feeling safe there. Parents have to home educate and, clearly, if you're home educating, you can't be in work.

Recommendations

- Expand access to FSMs by widening the eligibility criteria as a step towards universal provision, and enrolling eligible families automatically.
- Ensure children in families on a low income can fully participate in school by reducing the cost of the school day through mechanisms such as school uniform grants.
- Provide local government with resources to support families who face additional barriers to escaping poverty.

Housing

Housing is the largest cost that most low-income families face, therefore it is vital that policies that support families with housing costs are a core component of the child poverty strategy. Interviewees highlighted that housing costs have risen substantially in recent years, primarily as we have failed to build enough houses or replenish the social housing stock. Meanwhile, support through the social security system has not kept up with rapidly increasing rents and local housing allowance (LHA) has become more restricted. This has led to families having to spend more on housing and far less on other areas, lowering their living standards considerably. It has also led to a record number of children in temporary accommodation, as families are unable to afford even the most basic housing. They are often trapped there because of an inadequate social security system, which is amplified by the benefit cap.

In order to bring down ever rising rents, interviewees recommended a long-term strategy (with targets) to increase housing supply.¹⁸ Aside from that, the key recommendations are increasing the adequacy of housing-related support that is delivered through the social security system, and interviewees were clear that removing the benefit cap (covered in the social security section above) and increasing the adequacy of LHA are the two measures that would make the biggest difference to low-income families.

¹⁸ Housing is devolved, therefore central government cannot directly increase the stock in devolved nations. Nonetheless, if it were to spend money on increasing the social housing stock in England, devolved governments would then receive additional income through the Barnett formula, which they could also spend on increasing the stock of social housing in the devolved nations.

Increase the stock of social housing by 100,000 homes a year for 20 years

The social housing stock has been severely depleted over the last 40 years. This means many families have been pushed into the private rented sector, where rents are skyrocketing as demand outstrips supply. It also means that rates of homelessness have risen, and there are currently a record 164,000 children in temporary accommodation in England, which is extremely harmful for children and their families in a variety of different ways. This strategy is one of the ways that government can commit to measuring, reducing and supporting children living in temporary accommodation in the short and medium term.

To do this, the forthcoming strategy must include measures that invest in social housing, as the long-term strategy for reducing housing costs and ensuring that families are not pushed into temporary accommodation. Interviewees recommended that the government commits to increasing the stock of social housing by 100,000 a year for 20 years, which would replace the social housing that has been sold, and result in homelessness falling and rents becoming more manageable.¹⁹

There are also wider benefits as well. It's not just that social housing is more affordable, it's also that it's a much more stable form of housing, and a key thing for families is knowing that they can put down roots in an area. Having access to social networks, being able to draw on childcare from friends and family, for children to stay in the same schools.

The problem in the private sector is not just that rents are higher. Housing quality is lower, and tenancies are far more unstable. Interviewees were keen to highlight that investing in social housing has a wider impact than on just those families who find new accommodation in a social home. It also reduces pressure on the private rental market. Building more social homes will mean lower rents more widely, and families not being forced to live in expensive, poor-quality private rental properties.

Unfreeze local housing allowance

LHA sets the amount that private renters can get in housing support (the housing element of UC, previously housing benefit). When LHA was introduced in 2008, it was set at median rent for different sized homes in different local areas. In 2011, it was reduced to the 30th percentile of local rents, before being frozen and unfrozen in various years. It is currently frozen at April 2024 prices.

The 30th percentile is based on the idea that one in three private renters are claiming LHA. But this is the national picture, and it varies massively across the country. In Blackpool, for instance, just over 80 per cent of private renters are receiving housing support, so it makes no sense for it to be linked to one-third of the market.

Interviewees thought there was no justification for freezing LHA, as it means that many families receive less in housing support than they need to pay their rent. It is also unfair to claimants to keep changing (in real terms) the amount they receive, when they already face difficult budgeting decisions. Interviewees recommended that as a minimum LHA should be permanently pegged to the 30th percentile, however they were also keen to highlight that even without the freeze, the 30th percentile means some renters still don't receive enough support to cover their housing costs.

Recommendations

- Increase the stock of social housing by 100,000 a year for 20 years.
- Unfreeze LHA so that it more accurately reflects the housing costs that families face.

¹⁹ IPPR, [The homes that children deserve: Housing policy to support families](#), 2025

Childcare

A credible child poverty strategy must include policies that seek to improve the childcare system, with a particular focus on families living in poverty. Childcare is vital not only for enabling parents to work but also for child development, especially in the early years. High-quality early years education is vital for children's outcomes and has proven to be especially beneficial for children experiencing poverty, both in terms of school readiness and long-term outcomes.²⁰ Childcare is largely a devolved issue (with the exception of UC childcare) so provision varies across the four nations. This research focuses largely on issues relating to the childcare system in England, although opportunities to align the different systems across the UK are explored below, and changes to UC childcare would benefit families across the UK.

The UK government has announced some positive changes to the childcare system in England, including funding for 3,000 school-based nurseries, which is a welcome investment in the maintained childcare sector. High-quality childcare delivers improvements in children's outcomes but, according to Ofsted, childcare in disadvantaged areas tends to be of poorer quality. Research shows that maintained childcare settings deliver high-quality, affordable childcare options for families on a low income, and expanding these settings is a good way to deliver high quality to poorer families.²¹

Other problems remain. The (English) system is too restrictive in terms of eligibility criteria, the quality of childcare is highly variable, it is unnecessarily complex (lowering take-up), it is unaffordable for some low-income families, and there are enduring childcare gaps for older children, children with SEND, and for parents working atypical hours.

Increase access to affordable childcare for all children

An immediate step identified by interviewees was to expand the working families offer and childcare element of UC to certain families who are currently excluded. This includes:

- Parents in education or training.
- Single parent carers, disabled single parents, and parent carer/disabled couples who do not meet the earnings threshold.
- Parents with no recourse to public funds, many of whom are in work.

Beyond this, interviewees wanted to see the removal of the work criteria entirely for existing pre-school free-hours childcare offers. Currently, there is a 'disadvantaged offer' (for two-year-olds in families claiming certain benefits). As a starting point, making this offer universal would have the benefit of simplifying the system, and may increase take-up among low-income families, as the 'disadvantaged' stigma is removed.

In terms of childcare, I think the number one priority has to be making access to the funded childcare hours universal... removing the work criteria. Like we are in an absolutely ridiculous situation whereby there is such a difference between what children of affluent parents are entitled to from the state and what disadvantaged children are entitled to.

Simplify the childcare system

Take-up is currently low for many childcare schemes (eg, UC childcare). A key reason for this is that the current system is too complex. It is difficult for families to work out which schemes they are eligible for and how the schemes differ from each other. There is a lack of support for top-up fees for those claiming

²⁰ P Carneiro, S Cattan and N Ridpath, [The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes](#), Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024

²¹ Department for Education, [Effective pre-school, primary and secondary education project \(EPPSE 3-16+\), How pre-school influences children and young people's attainment and developmental outcomes over time](#), June 2015

costs back via UC compared to those claiming tax-free childcare. This is compounded by the fact that there are different childcare systems across the UK. The child poverty strategy represents a real opportunity for governments to work together to reform childcare provision, given the complex interaction between reserved support for childcare costs (via UC) and devolved provision of funded free childcare. There is also confusion around the role of the flexible support fund (FSF) and how it can support parents with childcare costs. Support via the FSF only covers those moving into employment or from part-time to full-time work, and excludes mothers returning from maternity leave.

The system [needs]... to be simplified because I think that's part of the problem is that people don't know how to navigate it. And there's been such a hollowing out of local authority budgets over the last kind of 14 years that there's often a lack of signposting in communities and people struggle to navigate... the systems available to them.

Families using UC childcare are still required to pay 15 per cent of their childcare costs, which creates an unnecessary disincentive to work (or work more). Although 15 per cent may not sound like much, when this is combined with the UC taper rate, income tax and NICs, it can make the increase in take-home pay of working more hours very low. There are also issues with the limited hours available in pre-school childcare schemes. This can discourage low-income parents from working full time.

The government should look to simplify and strengthen the childcare system overall and work towards having a free at the point of access universal childcare system. In the short term, the following changes should be made:

- Simplify the repayment system through UC.
- Allow parents to claim invoices which have top-up fees added (as is currently the case for those on tax-free childcare).
- Explore ways to increase the uptake of the FSF for childcare costs and expand it to mothers returning from maternity leave.

Reform childcare funding

There was widespread recognition among interviewees that, in the longer term, a significant injection of funding is needed in the early education and childcare system to ensure universal high-quality access. However, in the short term, some interviewees suggested that a redistribution of existing funding to focus more on families on a low income was key to tackling child poverty.

I would have a lower level of... free hours and you know that would go across... on a more universal basis and then a kind of means test [that is an] income-related sort of drop-off.

Another suggestion was to increase the disadvantaged element in the funding formula and boost Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP). One area of immediate concern for many interviewees is the lack of available nursery places for children with SEND, due to providers not receiving adequate funding to ensure children with SEND receive the additional support they need.

Specific recommendations include:

- Create a more inclusive SEND funding system by integrating a new 'developmental needs' element in the funding formula for emerging SEND needs, and base this on the results of the two-year health checks.
- Increase the disadvantaged element for early years providers in the funding formula so it's in line with schools.
- In addition to the recent uplift to the EYPP, increase the deprivation element within the national funding formula and bring EYPP in line with primary school pupil premium in the longer term.

- Improve the early years meals programme by removing restrictions eg, children only being eligible if they attend the setting before and after lunch, and work towards universal free meal provision for early years settings.

In the longer term, interviewees prioritised movement towards a more child-oriented, universal childcare system in the early years. There were, however, a variety of suggestions about how that could be achieved. There was some consensus on key principles for what a universal childcare system should look like:

- Long term, childcare should move towards an integrated system of support across early years, alongside healthcare and family support services, to provide a joined-up approach to children's outcomes. Many interviewees were positive about the benefits of Sure Start and suggested a return to this holistic approach to early years.
- A childcare system should enable a conversation about how much time parents and children have together as a family and enable parental choice. Some interviewees pointed to the unfairness of more well-off parents having the choice to stay home with their children, while parents on low incomes were forced to return to work due to UC work requirements.

Recommendations

- In the short term, increase access to the childcare offer that is currently only available to working families on UC to other families on a low income.
- In the long term, progress towards a free at the point of access universal childcare system.
- Simplify the way that families reclaim childcare costs through UC so it provides more timely accessible support to cover childcare costs.
- Invest in the childcare system to offer high-quality, universal provision, focusing first on plugging the gaps in provision for those with the greatest levels of unmet need (such as children with SEND).

Health and other services for children and families

This section focuses on early years services, as this is the focus of the forthcoming strategy. Interviewees had experience of delivering services for children and families in a range of settings, including health services and place-based services such as Sure Start. Interviewees were keen to emphasise that while early years services can mitigate the impact of poverty, they were not in themselves a means through which to reduce poverty. They also stressed that the capacity of services to mitigate poverty would be very limited unless other aspects of the strategy succeeded in reducing poverty (as poverty increases the demand on services, leaving them with less capacity to focus on mitigation). It was suggested that one way services can directly contribute to poverty reduction is through the provision of income maximisation advice (discussed further below).

Getting service provision right, particularly in the context of health services, is critical for children and families living in poverty. Research conducted by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and CPAG shows that experiences of poverty are contributing to poor health outcomes for children that are escalating in the absence of preventative care.²² This includes mental healthcare, with children and families experiencing significant delays in accessing CAMHS.

A lack of sufficient income is directly contributing to children missing out on healthcare, as families can't afford travel to appointments or to take time off work, or cannot run vital, life-saving equipment supplied

²² RCPCH and CPAG, [Poverty and child health: Views from the frontline](#), 2017

by the NHS as they cannot afford the electricity. Some of the earliest effects of poverty on children stem from poor maternal health during pregnancy. As outlined above, the priority for the strategy must be addressing family income to reduce the longer-term effects of poverty and to remove these barriers to healthcare, but there is much that can be done to improve services for children and families to ensure families don't experience additional barriers to getting the help they need.

Invest in preventative early years services that improve children's outcomes

Multiple interviewees remarked how investment in services that improve children's outcomes had contracted significantly in the past decade. Instead, money has been spent on increasing labour supply through childcare provision. There have also been more isolated investments in crisis management among families facing extreme hardship (such as the household support fund and Troubled Families programme). Interviewees wanted to see the services strand of the strategy emphasise early intervention and increased access to face-to-face support.

While there is strong evidence that early years services can have long-term impacts on children's outcomes, there is a danger that the return on investment is lost if school-age interventions focus on catching up children who have fallen behind, at the expense of supporting other children.

Integrated place-based services (such as Sure Start in England and Flying Start in Wales) can mitigate the negative effects of growing up in poverty and have a long-term impact on children's outcomes. These services also have the potential to offer a peer support element which has a positive impact on mental health outcomes and can make services more welcoming to parents.

There was also strong support for, and promising evidence of, the value of health visitors (offering information and support for new parents) in improving the outcomes of children from deprived backgrounds. The reduction in health visitors correlates with an increase in under ones being brought to emergency departments. These services are particularly beneficial because they support parents early, when they need support most, and they allow parents to develop trust with the health visitor who can also signpost them to other services.

We have a pretty robust international evidence base that suggests that home [health] visiting can be really effective.... The home visitor supports the parents, and then the parents are able to make more productive use of their time with their infant as well as address some of the barriers that they face to that, like mental health for example.

Remove access barriers for families living in poverty

Parents on lower incomes typically face higher access barriers because they have fewer resources to attend appointments (such as car access, childcare and flexible working). There is also a stigma around accessing some services, which can deter people from accessing them except as a last resort. By not accessing those services, families miss out on both the support that particular service is providing and the opportunity to be signposted to other services that could help. Some interviewees recommended having more community involvement in decisions about local service design, which can help ensure that services are accessible, welcoming and meet community needs. Another recommendation was to deliver services universally, wherever possible, as this helps to tackle stigma – this is discussed further below.

Invest in effective integrated service delivery

Interviewees identified the following prerequisites for the delivery of integrated early childhood services: collaboration, data sharing and impact monitoring.

Collaboration

A key first step is collaboration between different levels of government, government departments and local service providers. As a service delivered by one department may advance the outcomes sought by

another department, it is important that multiple departments have a stake in the services delivered under the strategy.

It's not enough to say this programme is run by this department, so they're the only people who have skin in the game when it comes to outcomes.

Lack of cross-departmental interest has been a limitation of programmes such as the Family Nurse Partnership, a home visiting programme for first-time teenage mothers run by the Department of Health and Social Care. It led to positive impacts on children's foundation stage outcomes but was discontinued due to negligible health outcomes.

At a local level, service fragmentation undermines access and complicates referral pathways. Some interviewees wanted central government to provide local authorities with clear guidance on delivering services that reduce poverty or mitigate its impact (similar to the guidance provided for the household support fund).

Data sharing

Interviewees were keen to highlight that there is a need for better data sharing mechanisms to provide efficient, timely and effective integrated service delivery. This is necessary to ensure that service providers can quickly understand a family's needs and provide appropriate signposting. It also means that service users do not need to repeat their story every time they access support.

Impact monitoring

While there is strong evidence that integrated service delivery has a positive and long-term impact on children's outcomes, there is limited evidence about which combinations of interventions have the greatest impact. It is important that impact metrics include a combination of short-term measures (so outcomes can be detected within a parliamentary term) and long-term measures (to show whether those outcomes are sustained, as was shown by recent research into the long-term impact of Sure Start).²³

With Sure Start, the benefits seem to get larger as children get older.... You do see impacts at age 5, but really the story there is what's happening when children are teenagers.

These measures also need to look at a wide range of indicators such as children's mental health and social skills, which affect their ability to thrive in adulthood. Interviewees highlighted that the early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP) is one example of a well-rounded measure that looks beyond attainment, but there is no equivalent for children once they reach school age. A broader set of impact measures will also encourage sustained collaboration across departments.

The balance between universal and targeted services

There is a need to provide both universal and targeted early years services. Universal services can provide valuable peer support to new parents during a significant shift in their lives; deliver preventative interventions; and secure middle class buy-in, which helps with ensuring the sustainability and quality of services. A universal place-based service can also enable parents to access services aimed at lower-income families (such as income maximisation advice) through signposting, referrals or co-location. Having a universal service as a gateway to more targeted support can increase access and reduce stigma.

²³ P Carneiro, S Cattam and N Ridpath, [The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes](#), Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2024

Income maximisation

Lack of access to properly-funded expert legal and welfare rights advice is a huge barrier to families receiving their lawful social security entitlement, which is prescribed by complex legislation. This strategy provides the opportunity to remedy the lack of publicly-funded advice and, where appropriate, representation, supporting families to have the money they are entitled to. It is also essential that families can have any problems with their social security claims resolved as soon as possible, helping to reduce the risk of escalation of poverty while they wait for a resolution. Providing access to early advice is vital to reduce the likelihood of families finding themselves in a crisis situation.

Recommendations for how to improve the support families have to receive their proper entitlement include: putting welfare benefits advice back into scope of legal aid and decoupling it from housing and debt contracts; ensuring that means testing for legal aid does not exclude struggling families from access to justice; supporting the welfare rights sector to resolve welfare benefits problems early through adequate funding and through funding for specialist second-tier services; and supporting a healthy legal advice sector with appropriate fee structures and efficient administration.

Recommendations

- Invest in preventative early years services that have been shown to improve children's outcomes (such as Sure Start and health visiting).
- Work with parents on a low income to identify and remove access barriers to services (such as transport costs, opening hours and stigma).
- Support local authorities to deliver integrated services that connect families to support that will help them, including advice services on maximising income.
- Provide national funding for welfare rights advice services, including second-tier advice services.
- Put welfare benefits back into the scope of legal aid and decouple from housing and debt contracts.

Conclusion

The forthcoming strategy represents a huge opportunity to significantly reduce child poverty in the UK, which has been rising over the past 15 years. This report has set out a number of recommendations for the forthcoming strategy, both for how the strategy should be designed and implemented, and some of the policies that should be contained within it.

Within these recommendations are some key themes that will be critical to the success of the forthcoming strategy. Firstly, the strategy must contain binding targets to reduce and eliminate child poverty over the short, medium and long term. Secondly, the strategy must include investment in the social security system, and scrapping the two-child limit and the benefit cap must be the first step. These two elements will provide a strong foundation for a strategy that delivers meaningful reductions in child poverty, improving the lives of millions of children and families across the UK.

Appendix 1: secondary indicators

The primary focus of any child poverty strategy has to be reducing the extent and depth of poverty. Nonetheless, there are secondary indicators that are useful to measure. These can be broken down into two groups:

1. Ways to increase living standards for low-income families indicators
2. Wider impact of reducing poverty indicators

The first group measures the ways in which the government can increase the living standards (through increased income or quality of life) for low-income families. These can be seen as the mechanisms through which to reduce the primary measures of child poverty. The second group measures the wider impacts of reducing child poverty on developmental, health and educational outcomes.

Ways to increase living standards for low-income families – indicators

Social security: Adequacy for different family types

The most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty is by increasing the adequacy of social security. This can either be measured by looking at several different archetypal families or through some weighted measures that encompass all family types.

Social security: Number of children living in households affected by the two-child limit

The staggered roll-out of the two-child limit means more and more children are affected every day, and it is the key driver of forecasted rising child poverty. Removing the two-child limit is the most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty.

Social security: Number of children living in households affected by the benefit cap

The benefit cap removes the link between entitlement and need for some of the poorest families across the country. The policy would be cheap to scrap and doing so would have no effect on employment. In addition, the cap has only been uprated once (by inflation) since its inception, meaning more and more children are living in households affected by the cap.

Social security: Take-up of UC

It is important to understand how many eligible families are not claiming UC, and their reasons for doing so. There are likely many families who would substantially benefit from applying for UC, but do not know they are eligible.

Social security: Number of children living in households affected by NRPF

Children living in NRPF families face the risk of very deep poverty, as they do not have access to many forms of social security. This means the burden often falls on local crisis support, which is already severely stretched.

Housing: Increase in stock of social housing (compared to target of 90,000 a year)

The demand for social housing has vastly outstripped supply in recent years. This means many low-income families have been forced into the private rental market, which can be characterised by high rents, low-quality accommodation and lack of stability.

Housing: Number of children living in temporary accommodation

The number of children living in temporary accommodation has risen dramatically in recent years. Reducing the number of children living in temporary accommodation drastically improves the standard of living for these families, while also reducing the cost to local authorities.

Housing: Number of children living in overcrowded/damp accommodation

Many children are living in overcrowded/damp accommodation. As families are unable to access social housing and incomes are not keeping up with housing costs, private landlords are able to provide unacceptably low-quality accommodation.

Childcare: Take-up of free entitlement pre-school childcare schemes by low-income families

Childcare is vital for parents increasing the number of hours they work as well as child development. However, many low-income families are unable to access the free entitlement pre-school childcare schemes, as they are not yet in work, or because restrictive funding means places are rationed.

Childcare: Take-up of UC childcare

Take-up of UC childcare is very low. The reasons for this need to be understood, and if parents are unable to work more because of barriers with UC childcare, these barriers need to be removed.

Employment: Average hours worked per household in poverty

Increasing hours worked, both in terms of getting parents into work, and working more hours once in work, is important for raising living standards. Previous governments placed too much focus on reducing unemployment and not enough on employment support to increase the hours of households already in work.

Employment: Average hourly wage for households in poverty

The other employment indicator to look at is the average hourly wage for households in poverty. Recent governments have focused on increasing the minimum wage, which although beneficial for many low-income families is badly targeted at reducing child poverty. There should be a greater focus on the hourly wage and quality of work parents in low-income families are able to obtain, rather than a sole focus on the minimum wage.

Employment: Percentage of parents who say they are underemployed

Increasing the number of hours worked and hourly wage of low-income parents will lead to a reduction in the share of parents who say they are underemployed. It will also show the scope for further policies to improve employment outcomes.

Education: Number of children in poverty who are not eligible for any form of FSM

Universal and means-tested FSM schemes cover many children in poverty, but many miss out on any form of FSM. Reducing the number of children who are not eligible means children are able to learn better, in a more inclusive environment, while also freeing up income for parents.

Wider impact of reducing poverty indicators

Reducing child poverty not only has the benefit of increasing living standards overnight but also improves a variety of short-term and long-term outcomes. It is important to track these indicators in order to see the full benefit of reducing child poverty.

Education: Good level of development at age five (school readiness)

Increasing the income of low-income families will mean that parents are able to spend more on young children, helping to achieve good development and increasing their school-readiness.

Education: Exam results of children from low-income families

Raising the income of low-income families will mean that children in these families are able to fare better at school. There are issues with the current FSM education gap measure, but a new measure that tracks exam results by income will show the impact of reducing poverty on educational outcomes.

Health: Infant mortality

Raising the income of low-income families will mean better maternal health as well as more money for parents to spend on keeping their children healthy.

Health: Child hospitalisations

Raising the income of low-income families will mean parents are able to spend more on the health needs of their children.

Appendix 2: list of interview participants

The following is a list of individuals and organisations who were interviewed as part of this research. We would like to thank everyone who took the time to participate in this work. Not every interview participant is listed. Interview participants do not endorse the findings and recommendations in this report.

1. Action for Children
2. Alex Beer, Former Head of Strategy and Analysis, Child Poverty Unit (2008-09)
3. Ann McVie, Former Deputy Director, Scottish government
4. Anne Longfield, Executive Chair of the Centre for Young Lives, Former Children's Commissioner for England, and Former Policy Advisor in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit
5. Barnardo's Northern Ireland
6. Carey Oppenheim, Former Special Advisor in Tony Blair's Number 10 Policy Unit
7. Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, University College London
8. Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office, Department of the Taoiseach, Ireland
9. Children in Wales
10. Coram Family and Childcare
11. Rocío Cifuentes, Children's Commissioner for Wales
12. Disabled Children's Partnership
13. Early Years and Childcare Coalition
14. Gingerbread
15. Improvement Service, Scotland
16. Institute for Employment Studies
17. Institute for Fiscal Studies
18. Koulla Yiasouma, Former Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People
19. Mental Health Foundation
20. Moira Wallace, Visiting Professor of Practice at the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE, and Former Director of the Cabinet Office Social Exclusion Unit (1997-2001)
21. Naomi Eisenstadt, Former Director of Sure Start, Former Director of the Social Exclusion Task Force, and Former Independent Advisor to the Scottish First Minister on Poverty and Inequality
22. Nesta
23. New Economics Foundation
24. New Zealand Public Service
25. Resolution Foundation
26. Resolve Poverty
27. Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
28. Runnymede Trust
29. Sam Freedman, Journalist and Former Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State for Education
30. Scottish Attainment Challenge Policy Unit, Scottish government
31. Shelter
32. Simon Hoffman, Professor of Human Rights and Children's Rights Specialist, Swansea University
33. Tackling Child Poverty and Social Justice Directorate, Scottish government
34. Tackling Poverty and Supporting Families Division, Welsh government

About CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. CPAG is a registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339). cpag.org.uk

About Save the Children

Founded in the UK in 1919, Save the Children is a global organisation helping children to survive and thrive in 116 countries, including here in the UK. Across the world we work to ensure that children in the poorest and most fragile countries have the healthcare, education, nutrition and protection they need to get the best start in life, overcoming poverty, conflict and crisis. In England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, we work to narrow the gap between children in poverty & better-off classmates. We are uniting families and schools, ensuring the poorest children get help, building positive home environments and campaigning for children's futures.

We believe that every child has the right to have their basic needs met, and to receive the support they need to ensure they can reach their full potential. The greatest barrier to this in the UK is poverty and inequality. Our UK mission is therefore to make a sustainable reduction in the number of children growing up in poverty, and to narrow the learning gap between those children and their better-off peers.

savethechildren.org.uk

About Impact on Urban Health

The places that we grow up, live and work impact how healthy we are. Urban areas, like inner-city London, have some of the most extreme health outcomes. Alongside their vibrancy and diversity sit stark health inequalities.

At Impact on Urban Health, we want to change this. We believe that we can remove obstacles to good health, by making urban areas healthier places for everyone to live.

The London Boroughs of Lambeth and Southwark are our home. They are some of the most diverse areas in the world. It is here that we invest, test, and build our understanding of how cities can be shaped to support better health. We're focused on a few complex health issues that disproportionately impact people living in cities, and we work with local, national and international organisations, groups and individuals to tackle these.

Our place is like so many others. So we share our insight, evidence and practical learning to improve health in cities around the world.

Impact on Urban Health is a part of [Guy's & St Thomas' Foundation](https://www.guythomas.org.uk).