

# THE GOOD SOCIETY STARTS SMALL

Reducing child poverty through redistribution,  
rights, and resolve.

Baroness Ruth Lister CBE



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### **About the author**

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### **About Compass**

Compass is the pressure group for a Good Society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build alliances of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support, and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link those with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resource and policy we call 45 Degree Change.



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## Contents

<b>Key Demands</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Why Child Poverty?</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Towards a Transformative Child Poverty Strategy</b>	<b>13</b>
The How	14
The What	16
<b>Concluding Thoughts: What Now?</b>	<b>24</b>
It is possible to reduce child poverty significantly	25
Potential stumbling blocks	25
<b>Notes</b>	<b>30</b>

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## Key Demands

- The Prime Minister and Chancellor should demonstrate publicly their commitment to the child poverty strategy, integrate it explicitly into the Government's missions and make clear that it should have high priority in the public spending review.
- The Government must be willing to invest sufficient money in the strategy if they are to achieve the manifesto commitment to an "ambitious" strategy to reduce child poverty. The money can be raised from the wealthy with the broadest shoulders.
- The strategy must include clear, legally-binding targets.
- People with lived experience of poverty must be involved in the strategy's execution and monitoring.
- The two-child limit and the benefit cap must be abolished as a first step in reforms designed to put the security back into social security. Universal credit and child benefit should be raised. There should be no more cuts.
- The temporary local authority Household Support Fund should be replaced by a permanent discretionary local crisis support scheme with ring-fenced funding.
- Barriers to decent work, especially for women, must be tackled and a supportive rather than punitive system of employment support developed.
- Support for migrant and asylum-seeking families must be improved.
- The freeze in the Local Housing Allowance must be ended.
- Free school meals should be extended – ideally on a universal basis but at the very least to all in receipt of universal credit. This should be backed up by a national commitment to auto-enrolment.
- Priority should be given to investing in preventative services to support children.
- Public services should adopt a human rights culture premised on respect of the human dignity of all service users.

# Foreword

Before I became an MP I was a GP for nearly thirty years, in a rural area in the south of Gloucestershire, on the edge of the Cotswolds. Most people would expect it to be a relatively affluent area, and while there are areas of affluence there are also areas of genuine poverty.

It was the realisation that people's life expectancy depended more on their post code than any health treatment that we could offer that made me, to paraphrase Tony Benn, want to give up medicine to help people live longer, healthier lives.

Life expectancy varies across the Stroud district by up to ten years depending on your postcode. Put nicely, the reason is inequality - more bluntly, poverty.

While those figures reflect more on the end of life, the impact of that postcode lottery on children is actually even worse. Children born into poverty suffer from low birth weight, higher rates of childhood disease, low self-esteem, poor mental health, obesity, and developmental delay on the health side, as well as lower educational attainment, lower employment, increased risk of being a victim of crime, bullying, and social isolation. Their life chances are reduced from the moment of birth, if not conception itself.

Children absorb the stresses and strains of their environment. They know when their family is poor and when the lack of money makes decisions about food and clothing hard. They know that they are from a poor family and they understand what that means.

Too often children try to help. They understand the stress that poverty places on their families. They say that things are ok and 'it doesn't matter'. Yet it does, and all these things are internalised.

In the UK around one in three children live in poverty.

As a society, and as a Government, we can do better. Nothing is more important.

Baroness Lister's report is timely and well judged. The actions that will make the most difference are relatively simple and inexpensive. The cost of not acting is far, far greater.

There are three ways in which the government can immediately lift hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty:

- Lift the two-child benefit limit on universal credit and tax credits immediately
- Abolish the benefit cap
- Make free school meals available to all

Longer term, we await the conclusions of the Child Poverty Strategy report, due shortly. But I hope it includes:

- Specific measures and mechanisms to halve child poverty within 10 years, and end child poverty within 20 years
- Legally binding targets based on those actions, and a requirement for the PM and Chancellor to report to Parliament on progress made

None of this happens in isolation.

A thriving economy where people earn a decent wage, local access to support and care, a more supportive approach from employers, with more flexible working, lower living costs (especially housing and energy costs), and a reformed benefits system are all well within our grasp.

We simply need to have the right priorities and make the right choices.

We have the chance to be the beginning of the end of child poverty.

**- Simon Opher MP, Stroud**

## Summary

- Child poverty matters to a good society. Children are disproportionately at risk of poverty with implications for them both as ‘beings’, whose childhood is blighted, and ‘becomings’ whose opportunities are diminished. It is a matter of children’s rights and has to be understood through an equalities lens, including a strong link between children’s and women’s poverty.
- The Government have established a cross-departmental ministerial taskforce, supported by a new Child Poverty Unit in the Cabinet Office. It is expected to report in the early Summer 2025. Here is the opportunity for change.

## The how

- The Government’s Child Poverty Taskforce, responsible for developing an “ambitious” strategy to reduce child poverty, scores pretty well on the tests set by End Child Poverty with regard to how it is conducting its enquiry. In particular, there is strong engagement with civil society organisations and a commitment to listening to parents and children with experience of poverty. This commitment must also be integral to the strategy’s execution and monitoring.
- The strategy will need to include clear, legally-binding targets, backed up with strong accountability mechanisms.

## The what

- Boosting income must be central to any child poverty strategy, in particular through investment in social security after a decade-or-so of massive cuts. This includes in particular: abolition of the two-child limit and the benefit cap; improvement in the level of universal credit and child benefit; the replacement of the temporary local authority Household Support Fund with a permanent local crisis support system; and improved support for migrants and asylum-seekers.
- Employment also has an important role to play, which means among other things: tackling the barriers to paid work including those faced by women; a supportive rather than punitive approach to employment support; good work at a decent wage (although the minimum wage is a blunt instrument for tackling child poverty); and support for progression.
- A range of costs need to be reduced in relation to housing, utilities, food, education, childcare, health and transport. Housing and education are highlighted.

- Policies to mitigate child poverty include: improved public services, especially preventative social services; adequate advice facilities; and the adoption of a human rights culture premised on respect for the human dignity of all service users.

## What now?

- Experience, both historical and international, shows that the right policies can reduce child poverty significantly. Labour proved it when it was last in power and child poverty was cut by 600,000, or six percentage points. But we now face a number of stumbling blocks. One is the costs. But account must also be taken of the cost of not acting effectively (including the political cost); of the preventative effects of spending to reduce child poverty; and of the potential for meeting the cost through taxation of the wealthy, as demonstrated by Stewart Lansley<sup>1</sup>.
- Tackling child poverty needs to be better integrated into the Government's missions, including economic growth, which on its own will not reduce child poverty. It should be seen as part of a wider strategy to enhance economic security.
- Political leadership from the Prime Minister and Chancellor (as shown by Gordon Brown and Tony Blair when in power) together with a clear bold vision are crucial. One practical step would be for them to impress on departments that they should prioritise child poverty within their spending review bids.



# Introduction

**“Labour will develop an ambitious strategy to reduce child poverty”.<sup>2</sup>**

This manifesto pledge is to be achieved through the work of a cross-departmental ministerial taskforce, established in August 2024, supported by a new Child Poverty Unit in the Cabinet Office and expected to report in the early Summer 2025.

The current scale and depth of child poverty undermine the very foundations of Compass’ vision of a good society and economy.<sup>3</sup> We therefore welcome the Government’s commitment but nevertheless believe that pressure needs to be maintained to ensure it leads to the transformative change that is required.

This publication aims to support the work of the taskforce. It is divided into two main parts: why child poverty matters and the building blocks of an effective child poverty strategy. The conclusion considers some of the stumbling blocks that need to be overcome to make a reality of the child poverty strategy promise.

# Why Child Poverty?

Poverty, especially persistent poverty, means going without the basics that the wider society takes for granted, thereby hampering full participation in society. It carries with it chronic insecurity as the smallest mishap can turn into a crisis. It constitutes a violation of basic human rights and dignity and carries with it relations of shame and stigma leading to the othering of people in poverty.<sup>4</sup> Although not the same as inequality, it represents the harshest manifestation of our profoundly unequal society.

In this country, children are increasingly disproportionately affected by poverty. This in part reflects a more universal factor – that children cost money and can have implications for earning capacity while wages cannot reflect family size. As the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) notes, “as a society, we have a collective interest in supporting children and parents while they navigate this time-limited but expensive stage of life”.<sup>5</sup>

But that support, both through benefits and services, has been slashed as a result of austerity. The result is that, at the latest official count, there were 4.5 million children living in poverty, which is very nearly a third of all children.<sup>6</sup> This compares with an overall poverty rate of 17 per cent for childless people of working age and of 16 per cent for pensioners.

On current policies, Resolution Foundation projections suggest as many as 36 per cent of children could be in poverty by 2034-5, the end of the child poverty strategy’s expected time frame.<sup>7</sup> As we will see, intersecting inequalities mean that some children are at even greater risk of poverty.

What has been particularly striking in recent years has been the growing depth of poverty as families are pushed further and further below the poverty line. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), “people in poverty and those in deep poverty now fall further below the poverty and deep poverty lines than they did a quarter of a century ago.”<sup>8</sup>

The case for prioritising child poverty does not lie only in the disproportionate risk of poverty children face but also in the impact on them and their childhood. People rightly warn of the effects of poverty on children’s life chances and opportunities. But children are not just ‘becomings’. They are also ‘beings’ whose childhood and current wellbeing matter and childhood represents a short but pivotal period of the life course that cannot be lived more than once.<sup>9</sup>

The stigma associated with poverty can be particularly wounding for children who are developing a sense of their identity and who do not want to be seen as “different”; they can have difficulties “fitting in” and

“joining in”, which can lead to bullying.<sup>10</sup>

This underlines how child poverty has to be understood as a children’s rights issue. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has noted “with deep concern the large number of children living in poverty, food insecurity and homelessness” in the UK. It, UNICEF UK and End Child Poverty (ECP), a coalition of 120 organisations, have all, in the words of ECP, made clear that child poverty is “a violation of children’s rights”.<sup>11</sup>

ECP also emphasises the importance of an equalities lens when understanding child poverty (of which more later), including the “clear link between child poverty and women’s poverty”. Women are still the main managers and shock absorbers of family poverty and it is their earnings which are still likely to be affected by the presence of children.<sup>12</sup> Some women’s poverty is hidden when incomes are not distributed fairly within the family, with implications for children.

# **Towards a transformative child poverty strategy**



This part is divided into two sections. The first looks at how the Child Poverty Taskforce is proceeding and discusses how any child poverty strategy needs to be developed; the second outlines what the contents of such a strategy should be.

## The How

The taskforce involves ministers from most Government departments (though, inexplicably, not the Home Office, given its impact on migrant poverty) and has both a national and local focus. It meets regularly, with the support of the Child Poverty Unit, and has undertaken several outreach visits across the UK. Here it acknowledges what it can learn from the devolved governments and from local areas.

It has engaged strongly with civil society organisations that work with and for families in poverty and has established an Analytical Expert Reference Group to provide academic scrutiny and challenge.

Perhaps most importantly, it is committed to listening directly to parents and children with experience of poverty “to gather insight on their current experiences and what would have the greatest impact on their day-to-day lives”.<sup>13</sup> This has included working with the [Changing Realities project](#), which brings together parents and carers with experience of poverty, supported by the University of York and CPAG.

This is all part of an engagement plan that emphasises learning from people outside government and giving them power to shape the engagement.

The plan is being developed around four key themes: increasing incomes; reducing essential costs; strengthening financial resilience (through action on debt and savings); and better local support particularly during children’s early years. The experience of deep poverty is highlighted.

Reading the taskforce’s engagement plan alongside the ‘tests’ set by ECP shows that it scores well for how it is pursuing the task, particularly with regard to taking seriously the lived experience of children, parents and carers in poverty. ECP underlines that “the strategy must set out how children and families’ views have been reflected in the final output and how they will be involved in implementation and evaluation”.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the commitment to the involvement of parents and children with experience of poverty must not end with the publication of the strategy but must be integral to its execution and monitoring. This needs to include “feedback loops” throughout the process, including delivery, so that those involved know what account has been taken of their insights.<sup>15</sup>

There is also a clear understanding that, as ECP argues, there must be genuine involvement at local, regional and devolved nation levels, sensitive to the development of devolution settlements since the previous child poverty strategy.<sup>16</sup>

An open letter to the Child Poverty Unit organised by Resolve Poverty underlined that it should build on and reinforce existing work at every level of government and that “to maximise its effectiveness, it must align all levels of government behind a shared agenda that drives lasting change and prioritises *prevention* over crisis-led responses” (my emphasis and a point to which I will return). This agenda could offer direction to all public bodies as well as the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors.<sup>17</sup>

As noted earlier, another ‘test’ set by ECP is that the strategy takes an equalities and intersectional approach “recognising that existing structural inequalities for marginalised groups means certain children are more likely to live in poverty”.<sup>18</sup> Although attention to structural inequalities is not explicit so far in the taskforce’s work, there is recognition of the particular risks of poverty faced by disabled children and by children in racially minoritised groups – with, for instance, three fifths or more of children in Bangladeshi and Pakistani households in poverty.

Following combined pressure from a group of organisations specialising in poverty reduction, child poverty and migration, the taskforce has confirmed that its remit includes asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children. Whereas in the past there has been a tendency to approach poverty and migration in separate silos, it has been made clear that this anti-poverty strategy will cover *all* children.

Where the taskforce does not meet the ECP’s tests is the absence so far of a children’s rights perspective. Such a perspective was urged on the UK recently by the UN Committee on Economic, Social & Cultural Rights.<sup>19</sup> It could provide an important internationally recognised underpinning for the strategy and potentially increase its resilience in the face of a change in the political weather. Happily, at a parliamentary briefing, this omission was acknowledged and parliamentarians were reassured that work was now being undertaken to understand how a children’s rights perspective can inform the strategy.

The taskforce also, as yet, has made no commitment to the establishment of “legally binding, independently evaluated, targets that build clear milestones to ultimately eradicate child poverty in 20 years”, or to the aim of “halving child poverty over the next 10 years”.<sup>20</sup> While it may be premature to expect such a commitment at this stage, the experience of the last Labour government, when targets helped to galvanise action on child poverty, even if the targets weren’t actually

met, does underline their importance to the effectiveness of the strategy that emerges.

This time there also needs to be a deep poverty target given the increase in deep poverty in the intervening period. Moreover, the UK has signed up to an international target in the form of the Sustainable Development Goals, one of which is “to reduce at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions”.<sup>21</sup> CPAG places great emphasis on the importance of “aspirational yet achievable” targets, enshrined in law and backed up by “robust accountability mechanisms” involving regular reporting at different levels of government, improved data and the establishment of an independent monitoring body.<sup>22</sup>

## The What

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) suggests three broad elements of a child poverty strategy: most important is boosting incomes; followed by reducing or eliminating certain costs; and finally, mitigation policies that reduce the harms caused by poverty.<sup>23</sup>

The idea that more money for those living in poverty has to be central to any anti-poverty strategy is all too often dismissed as ‘throwing money at the problem’. But as the Resolution Foundation points out, in a commodified society such as ours boosting incomes “remains the quickest most effective and most reliable means of lifting families out of poverty and has been shown to substantially reduce differences in school achievements and improve children’s health and wellbeing”.<sup>24</sup>

Research by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Exclusion at the LSE shows how money does make a real difference.<sup>25</sup> It allows parents to spend to the benefit of children and the evidence suggests that this is what they do; it can help create a better emotional family environment to the benefit of the mental health of both parents and children; and it can improve children’s emotional wellbeing. In the words of an earlier CPAG report, “the evidence is undeniable that money matters: if a family has sufficient income to meet their children’s needs, it makes a big difference to their children’s ability to thrive”.<sup>26</sup>

## Boosting incomes

IPPR makes clear its view that “bolstering social security should come top of the priority list” as “a central plank to any child poverty strategy”.<sup>27</sup> In a similar vein, ECP maintains that “social security reform must be the bedrock of the strategy” and Paul Kissack, Group Chief Executive of the JRF, warns that “any credible child poverty strategy

must include policies that rebuild the tattered social security system”.<sup>28</sup> He acknowledges the improvements that were announced in the Budget but, while welcome, “they are timid. They fall a long way short of what is required to deliver the scale of change needed”.<sup>29</sup>

Subsequent cuts in disability benefits, confirmed in the Spring Statement, will, according to the DWP’s own impact assessment, result in an increase of 50,000 in the number of children in poverty.<sup>30</sup> While this does not take account of the impact of measures to improve employment support, the details of this are yet to be spelt out.

ECP sums up the views of the broad consensus among anti-poverty organisations, think tanks and academics: “Investing in social security is essential if we are to meaningfully reduce child poverty and protect children’s rights. The government must shift from viewing social security as a sign of failure towards viewing it as an essential investment in children and families. This means abolishing the two-child limit and benefit cap as a downpayment on longer term investment in social security to ensure that children do not grow up in poverty”.<sup>31</sup>

There was considerable disappointment that steps were not taken in the Budget with regard to the two-child limit (which limits means-tested support for children to the first two children) and the benefit cap (which sets a ceiling on how much can be received in universal credit or housing benefit, particularly affecting larger families or those with high rents).

With regard to the latter, the level of the cap was frozen yet again, meaning that those affected do not benefit from the 2025 benefits uprating. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), like many others, has shown that “the single most cost-effective policy for reducing the number of children living below the poverty line is removing the two-child limit”. It has been the main driver of the increase in child poverty, which is concentrated among larger families to the particular detriment of racially minoritised groups.

Suggestions floated in the media that the strategy might seek to introduce exemptions rather than abolish the limit do not address the fundamental principle that entitlement should be based on assessed need.<sup>32</sup> Nor do they alter the Resolution Foundation’s conclusion that “the two-child limit is incompatible with a credible Child Poverty Strategy”.<sup>33</sup>

Although abolition of the cap would lift fewer children out of poverty it would, according to the IFS, “significantly alleviate the depth of poverty faced by some of the poorest children and provide a bigger proportional boost to their incomes”.<sup>34</sup> The cap also contributes to family homelessness and has a disproportionate impact on survivors

of domestic abuse and their children without meeting its own key objective of encouraging more people into paid work.<sup>35</sup>

The IFS's observations and the Resolution Foundation's analysis suggest that the first step in any child poverty strategy must be abolition of both pernicious policies, not least because of the way they interact to drive up poverty. The Government are unable to provide an estimate of the cost of doing so but independent estimates suggest a combined cost of around £4.5bn a year by the end of this parliament.<sup>36</sup> As evidence mounts of the misery they are causing, there can be no excuse for any further delay. And the broad consensus is that no child poverty strategy worthy of the name could omit their abolition as a top priority.<sup>37</sup>

More generally, with all the talk of a 'ballooning welfare bill', it is conveniently forgotten that, according to CPAG, £50bn a year has been cut from the social security budget as a result of the freezes, cuts and restrictions imposed over the past decade or so.<sup>38</sup> The results can be seen most clearly in the increase in deep poverty as many of those affected were in poverty already. While it's true that spending on health and disability benefits has increased significantly, that is not true of overall spending on working-age benefits which represents roughly the same percentage of GDP as ten years ago.<sup>39</sup> According to the National Institute for Economic and Social Research, the UK has some of the least generous social security across the OECD, ranking in the middle for spending (as a per centage of GDP) and third lowest for value (in relation to average wages).<sup>40</sup>

It's not clear how the work of the Child Poverty Taskforce will interact with the review of universal credit also promised in the manifesto, but both need to address the "wealth of evidence that benefit levels are not meeting need".<sup>41</sup> The result is that "we do not have a safety net worth its name" with the result that claimants are denied "access to the most fundamental material resources needed to function day to day and have healthy lives."<sup>42</sup>

Various proposals have been made to address this basic flaw including: establishing a benchmark for assessing benefit adequacy against which current benefit levels can be assessed; restoring the universal credit family element for the first child; and introducing a protected minimum floor in universal credit as a first step towards an 'essentials guarantee' which would ensure it could not fall below "the amount needed to afford the essentials, including food, household bills, and essential travel" – a pretty minimalist demand from the perspective of relative poverty but one which could make a real difference given the various ways benefit entitlement has been divorced from assessed needs.<sup>43</sup> Also, the Resolution Foundation warns that, unless benefits are uprated in line with earnings in future, child poverty could well rise again in the medium



term.<sup>44</sup>

This is not the time for further benefit cuts; instead it must be a time for rebuilding social security so that it fulfils its primary function of providing genuine financial security through social means.<sup>45</sup> And this rebuilding must include child benefit, which is the one form of (more or less) universal support for children that provides their parents (in particular mothers) with a modicum of genuine financial security and stability as well as helping to prevent child poverty.<sup>46</sup> Like most other benefits, it has been subject to cuts over the past decade so provides less support than it did under the last Labour government.

One positive step taken in the Budget was the extension of the local authority Household Support Fund until March 2026. Although not exclusively for families with children, it has played an important role in underpinning the inadequate social security safety net by providing them with a lifeline when struggling with hardship and hunger. Its effectiveness has, though, been undermined by the short-term nature of the scheme hitherto, which has prevented local authorities from planning properly. It is essential that the breathing space achieved through its extension is used to develop a longer-term permanent scheme.

It is often forgotten that the discretionary welfare assistance schemes that it complements replaced the national statutory social fund. Yet because they are discretionary a growing number of local authorities are abandoning them altogether. What is needed now is a permanent scheme that incorporates both provisions into the kind of discretionary cash-first local crisis support scheme with ring-fenced funding, proposed by Trussell.<sup>47</sup> Such a scheme would play a crucial role in meeting the manifesto pledge of trying to “end mass dependence on emergency food parcels, which is a moral scar on our society”.<sup>48</sup>

Trussell make clear that any such scheme must be open to migrants with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and therefore call for a change in the Immigration Rules to ensure that this is the case. According to an evidence briefing from CASE and COMPAS, “children in migrant and asylum-seeking families living in the UK are at a disproportionately high risk of poverty and destitution”.<sup>49</sup> The NPRF rule restricts their access to means-tested benefits and child benefit. According to Barnardo’s, it is the “principal poverty driver for asylum-seeking and migrant children”.<sup>50</sup>

A joint inquiry by the All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG) on Migration, and on Poverty and Inequality, made a number of recommendations that would help reduce migrant child poverty including the exclusion of child benefit from the definition of public funds.<sup>51</sup> Others, including Barnardo’s, have urged the complete

exemption of families with children from NRPF conditions.

Another source of child poverty is the asylum support scheme paid well below universal credit levels. The APPG inquiry called for a review of asylum support levels which should consider returning to the position of setting asylum support at 70 per cent of mainstream social security benefits. Overall, the ways in which immigration rules contribute to the disproportionate risk of poverty experienced by migrant and asylum-seeking families must be a key part of the child poverty strategy.

There is a tendency for politicians to treat proposals for improvements to social security support as secondary to what they consider the main route out of poverty: paid work. Of course, employment (as well as education) is an important factor in the prevention of poverty especially in the longer term. And a well-paid, secure job compatible with any care responsibilities and supported by good public services, including childcare, is the best route out of poverty for those able to take it.

But this is not the kind of work available to many of those otherwise reliant on social security benefits (and not all are able to take it). All too often for them paid work proves to be a cul de sac. Thus, policies that

have put all their eggs in the basket of getting people into paid work have contributed to a big increase in in-work poverty and the continued reliance of many on social security to top up their wages.

While the risk of poverty remains much lower for households that contain a wage-earner, 7 in 10 (72 per cent) children in poverty live in such a household and about half (49 per cent) live in a household where at least one adult works full time. JRF notes “a shockingly high” poverty rate of 50 per cent for children in families where at least one adult is (but not all adults are) in paid work and of 14 per cent where all adults are in paid work.<sup>52</sup>

However, where more than one adult is in paid work, the risk of poverty is reduced considerably. As the Women’s Budget Group notes, this means that “any strategy relying on paid work as the main route out of poverty needs to be explicitly gendered”, addressing both women’s disadvantaged labour market position and the barriers they face in taking up paid work both as lone parents and second earners.<sup>53</sup>

These barriers include: the lack of available and affordable good quality child care and of suitable and affordable public transport; the need for retraining because of career breaks; poor opportunities for flexible working compatible with child care responsibilities (though the Employment Bill currently going through parliament should help with this), and universal credit disincentives for a second earner in couples.

As well as the barriers created by the presence of children, the

Resolution Foundation notes that just under half of families in poverty and not in paid work contain an adult with a disability or long-standing limiting health condition and just under three in ten have a child with a disability.<sup>54</sup> Overall, it warns that “the majority of parents in poverty who remain out of work face at least one barrier to entering work” and that there is much less scope now than in the past for entry into paid work to provide the answer to child poverty.<sup>55</sup>

It is to be hoped that the improvements to employment support provided by Job Centres, heralded in the Get Britain Working White Paper, will help overcome at least some of the barriers faced. It is though important that the reforms do not pursue a ‘work first’ approach, backed up by punitive sanctions, which pushes claimants into any available jobs regardless of suitability. Those interviewed for the CPAG report “were clear that, at the moment, there is far too much stick and not enough carrot”.<sup>56</sup>

Once barriers are overcome, jobs should provide a decent income.

A welcome development has been the steady rise in the minimum wage. But as the IFS has warned, this is a blunt instrument when it comes to tackling child poverty because many of the beneficiaries are not in households measured as in poverty and many of those who *are* in poverty will lose some of the gain in the reduction in any means-tested benefits they receive.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, low hours are more of a problem than low pay from the perspective of child poverty.<sup>58</sup>

As well as improving the paid work available to those in receipt of benefits, policy is increasingly focusing on how to facilitate progression through either increased hours or higher pay and better jobs. The Resolution Foundation is supportive of such an approach but warns that it needs to take into account the difficulties for workers in ‘survival mode’ struggling to get by and to juggle paid work with caring responsibilities and for whom progression might mean more stress and reduced benefits.<sup>59</sup>

## Reducing costs

IPPR maps out for illustrative purposes the wide range of costs associated with running a household and raising children that could be reduced or eliminated for low-income households.<sup>60</sup> These cover: housing, utilities, food, education and enrichment, childcare, health, and transport. Any comprehensive cross-departmental and multi-governmental level child poverty strategy needs to address all these areas, some of which overlap with policies to boost incomes and to improve public services. I will pick out just two here.

The most significant is housing. A recent IPPR/Save the Children

report argues that “housing costs are core to understanding child poverty” both as the single largest cost faced by families and because housing affects children’s physical and mental health, education and wellbeing.<sup>61</sup> High housing costs are “a major driver of poverty...leading to a risk of compromised living standards, insecurity and at worst, homelessness”.<sup>62</sup> The Renters' Rights Bill, currently going through Parliament, will help but in the view of the Renters’ Reform Coalition it could go much further to ensure affordability.

One immediate reform which would mitigate rental costs in the private rental sector would be to end the freeze imposed on Local Housing Allowance periodically over the past decade or so. This should be the first step in a more fundamental review of the structure of the allowance and of the availability of decent quality housing for low-income families with children.

The costs associated with education, highlighted by CPAG over the years in relation to “poverty-proofing the school day”, need also to be addressed.<sup>63</sup> The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill will go some way to help through limiting the costs of school uniform and providing free breakfast clubs in primary schools. But so far the Government have resisted calls for universal free school meals or even their extension to all those on universal credit. The cost of school meals is significant for those on low incomes who don’t qualify for free meals and the result can be insubstantial packed lunches of low nutritional quality.

The Resolution Foundation suggests that the extension of free school meals offers “a significant potential tool for reducing child poverty and deprivation” that could also boost children’s health and academic performance.<sup>64</sup> At an absolute minimum a national commitment to the auto-enrolment of those who qualify for free school meals would improve their take-up. School uniform and PE kit grants, provided in Scotland, would also help families struggling with these costs in England, according to CPAG.

## **Mitigating child poverty**

Public services, including health (mental and physical), early years, education, housing and Violence against Women and Girls services, can play an important role in mitigating poverty and therefore they need to be adequately funded. Important too are advice and support services.

As the Women’s Budget Group notes “advice services embedded in local communities that offer support in multiple areas of people’s lives, including debt management, employment upskilling and support, and benefit advice, can have a particularly positive impact”.<sup>65</sup> But such services have been the victim of local authority cuts in response to austerity budgets. The rebuilding of a network of advice services is one

of the many valuable contributions that local authorities can make to a national child poverty strategy, with support from national government and backed up by the reinstatement of welfare rights advice within the scope of legal aid.<sup>66</sup>

Of particular importance from the perspective of mitigating child poverty are preventative children's social care services, similarly the victim of years of austerity under-funding. Barnardo's notes that "England now spends over 11 times more on late intervention than on preventative services" that can play a critical role in helping families in poverty.<sup>67</sup>

According to academic analysis, "deprived communities have worse access to good-quality children's services" so that "inequalities in child welfare interventions associated with deprivation have widened", with the result that "those most in need of high-quality services to prevent child maltreatment are least likely to have access to them".<sup>68</sup> In their evidence to the taskforce, ATD Fourth World makes the case for diverting funds from late interventions to investment in "collaborative early support for families of children in need before crises arise". This would both enable families to stay together and save money.<sup>69</sup>

The work of ATD and other organisations that enable people in poverty to contribute to anti-poverty analysis and campaigns has underlined the importance of how people in poverty are treated by public services and are talked about by politicians and the media. While poverty is essentially a material condition, it is also experienced as a psycho-social and relational phenomenon through relationships with others at both the interpersonal and societal levels including through interactions with professionals and officials.<sup>70</sup> A cross-national study of shame and poverty led to a call for a shift from "shame-inducing to dignity-promoting" policies and practices.<sup>71</sup>

This points to the adoption by public services of a human rights culture premised on respect for the human dignity and equal citizenship of *all* service users, which experience suggests can be transformative. Such a culture and poverty-aware practice can be facilitated by the involvement of people with experience of poverty in the training of public service professionals and officials.

Not only does such an approach respect the dignity of service users experiencing poverty but it also acknowledges their agency, as does the involvement of people with experience of poverty in policy debate, development and implementation (discussed earlier). A critical review of how poverty is framed in dominant poverty discourses by both politicians and the media has an important role to play in any poverty strategy not least in winning the support of the wider public.



# **Concluding comments: where now?**

This contribution to the debate around child poverty has used IPPR's schema to make the case for action on several fronts: boosting incomes (in particular through social security and employment), reducing costs and poverty mitigation. CPAG concludes that important as investment in services and infrastructure can be in helping improve families' experiences and providing "a buffer from the effects of poverty...there is no substitute for policies that support income directly".<sup>72</sup> And it warns that "in the absence of action to increase household incomes, services will struggle to succeed".<sup>73</sup>

I agree, but I have also argued that how people in poverty are treated by public services and talked about by politicians is important too and must be part of any child poverty strategy. In conclusion, I will reflect on the politics of making a transformative child poverty strategy happen in the current political and difficult fiscal context.

## **It is possible to reduce child poverty significantly**

The first point to make is that experience shows that reducing child poverty is possible and that it is an issue responsive to policy. As the Resolution Foundation points out, "recent history has shown that child poverty rates are amenable to policy changes, and the Government has levers it can pull that could make a considerable impact".<sup>74</sup> The 1997-2010 Labour governments pulled a range of levers and made a considerable impact, reducing child poverty by 600,000 or six percentage points, even if they didn't meet their own targets. The reduction in child poverty was one of New Labour's main achievements.

The fact that we compare badly with comparable European countries<sup>75</sup> indicates that such high levels of child poverty are not inevitable. And closer to home, Scotland is now showing what is possible even within the current fiscally challenging context. Thanks to a number of income-boosting measures, including the introduction of the Scottish Child Payment (SCP), worth £27.15 a week as from 1 April 2025, Resolution Foundation projections suggest that, on the basis of current policies, by 2029-30 child poverty could be nine percentage points lower in Scotland than England.<sup>76</sup> Evidence from parents in Scotland to the Poverty and Inequality Commission and from the preliminary findings of a new Family Finances project suggests that the SCP is making a real difference to parents' lives.<sup>77</sup>

## **Potential stumbling blocks**

Second, while the work of the Child Poverty Taskforce and Child Poverty Unit so far is very much to be applauded, the final outcome

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faces a number of potential stumbling blocks, which I will discuss under the headings of costs; integration with wider government missions and priorities; and political leadership and vision.

## Costs

Inevitably, a major stumbling block in the current fiscal context will be the money needed to fund an effective child poverty strategy. While not all elements of such a strategy will cost money, removing the key drivers of child poverty will inevitably require public spending. In a joint letter to the Secretary of State for Work & Pensions and the Secretary of State for Education, who co-chair the taskforce, the Chairs of the Education Select Committee and Work & Pensions Select Committee note the absence of information on the resources available to deliver the strategy and call for such information when it is published.<sup>78</sup>

Some indication of the kind of resources necessary to tackle child poverty effectively is provided by the Resolution Foundation for their package of measures which, they suggest, could lift 740,000 children out of poverty by 2029-30 and benefit as many as six million children overall. The combined cost of roughly £8.5bn may be significant but as they point out, it “would be under half of what the previous Government spent on National Insurance rate cuts ahead of the general election” and is “far less than the roughly £40 billion of new family support announced under New Labour (albeit in better fiscal circumstances); smaller than the package of benefit cuts announced in 2015; and broadly equivalent to spending on the Scottish Child Payment (even excluding any new two-child limit mitigation)”.<sup>79</sup>

A number of commentators have suggested how money could be raised from the taxation of the wealthy.<sup>80</sup> The Resolution Foundation also warn of the political costs of the emergent child poverty strategy not containing, inevitably costly, measures that will reduce poverty significantly.

There are also some more fundamental arguments about costs and spending that should be considered. One is the cost of *not* acting. As CPAG has pointed out “child poverty is costing the country money, directly and indirectly. Having so many families and their children in poverty draws huge costs from other government budgets: poorer physical and mental health impacts the NHS, poorer educational

attainment reduces workforce skills, and additional public services are needed to cushion poverty’s effects”. Overall, a cautious estimate of such costs in 2023 put them at around £39 billion a year.<sup>81</sup> In similar vein the New Economics Foundation argues, specifically in relation to scrapping the two child limit and benefit cap, that this would “bring immediate benefits to local economies, relieve pressure on public

services over time, and improve the long-term life-chances and earnings potential of the children affected”.<sup>82</sup> A similar point has been made in relation to the extension of free school meals.<sup>83</sup>

The cost of not acting overlaps with the argument that spending to reduce child poverty should be regarded as *preventative* spending. The Institute of Government has been among those arguing for a shift from spending on acute towards more preventative provisions. In a report aimed at the incoming government, it argued “there is good evidence that spending on a wide range of preventative services and programmes – including benefits, Sure Start centres, public health and youth work – can improve people’s outcomes and, in time, reduce acute demand for public services”.<sup>84</sup>

In an earlier report, it used reducing poverty through cash transfers as a case study of a preventative approach.<sup>85</sup> It suggested that although “difficult to directly prove, higher rates of poverty are associated with worse outcomes, which then require acute service intervention... So while there is no strong evidence showing a direct causal link between the generosity of welfare cash transfers and demand for acute services, this can be inferred given the good evidence both that benefit levels impact on poverty, and that poverty is a driver of demand for acute services”. It therefore recommended that from a preventative perspective, the Government should consider increasing the generosity of key benefits alongside preventative public services and that arguably they might be a more cost-effective way of reducing the need for acute services.<sup>86</sup>

## **Integration into wider government priorities and missions**

A preventative approach underlines how an effective child poverty strategy involves and interacts with a range of policy areas of importance to the Government. ECP spells out that “lifting children out of poverty is the key that can unlock many of the Government’s wider goals, including its mission to break down barriers to opportunity and ambition for the healthiest generation of children ever”.<sup>87</sup>

This perspective is reflected in the statement by the co-chairs of the Taskforce that tackling child poverty is not just a “moral imperative” but is also “crucial to building a stronger society and economy. Driving down child poverty...is at the heart of our Opportunity Mission... and ensuring millions of children and young people are not held back is also crucial to economic growth”.<sup>88</sup> And yet, and yet – why does it feel as though the child poverty strategy is being marginalised by the preeminent growth mission?

As the JRF has underlined, economic growth on its own will not reduce poverty.<sup>89</sup> Children in poverty cannot wait for the fruits of economic

growth to trickle down as their childhood ticks by. Moreover, this raises the more fundamental question, posed by Rowan Williams among others: growth for whom and for what end? ‘Good growth’, as called for by the Good Growth Foundation, cannot afford to ignore child poverty.<sup>90</sup>

Tackling child poverty needs to be seen as part of a wider strategy to combat a sense of economic insecurity among a wider population than solely those who might be in poverty. The Labour leadership talked a lot about economic insecurity when in Opposition and in the manifesto, but rather less so since coming to power, though the Chancellor did emphasise security in her Spring Statement, which nevertheless created considerable anxiety and insecurity among disabled people.

Yet a recent study by the Nuffield Politics Research Centre suggests that addressing voters’ economic insecurity, especially among those aged 35-59 (which includes some of the key child-rearing years) and among women, should be a government priority, given its electoral salience for these voters.<sup>91</sup>

I have argued elsewhere of “the need to embed anti-poverty policy within wider policy debates” not only because poverty overlaps with other policy issues but also “more importantly, to engage the general population by combating the tendency to residualize the issue of poverty. Rather than focus relentlessly on the negativities of poverty, we need to engage society as a whole in a more hopeful conversation about what a good society without poverty would look like”.<sup>92</sup> This brings me to the all-important issue of political vision and leadership, which helps to answer my earlier question as to why it feels as if the child poverty strategy is being marginalised despite the taskforce’s cross-governmental approach.

## Political leadership and vision

ECP’s fourth test for a truly cross-government approach that drives forward “the scale of change needed” lies with the very top of government: “the Prime Minister and Chancellor must demonstrate strong support and ensure buy-in and ownership from the entire Cabinet, communicating their commitment publicly and regularly throughout the life of the strategy”.<sup>93</sup> Gordon Brown and Tony Blair’s very public commitment to New Labour’s child poverty strategy was a crucial factor in its success.

One practical step now would be for the Prime Minister and Chancellor to impress on departments that they should prioritise child poverty in their bids for the spending review. Yet they rarely even mention the strategy in their public pronouncements. It is not surprising therefore that one campaigner told Heather Stewart of the *Guardian* that “we are now very anxious that this hasn’t been given the attention it



deserves from the very top politically”.<sup>94</sup>

As well as cost, a reason for this reticence suggested to Stewart by “some inside government” was that tackling child poverty “clashes with the desire by some in Labour to present the party as tough on welfare” on which the party is seen to have “a brand identity problem”. If so, it is depressing that the party is not willing to go on the offensive and make the positive case for investment in social security particularly as key to tackling child poverty. Arguably the failure of New Labour to do so, so that they did good by stealth while adopting a negative narrative of ‘welfare dependency’, helps explain why it was so easy for the Tories to cut social security and undo the good done by Labour. Today’s dismal picture regarding child poverty is one result. This child poverty strategy must be built to last.<sup>95</sup>

IPPR puts it well: “The government must make a positive case for bold reform, rejecting some of the prevailing discourse of recent years. To be genuinely transformative, government must “grasp the nettle” and prepare to argue for what it believes in”.<sup>96</sup> This has to start immediately and it has to be led from the top, with a clear inspiring longer-term vision.

What is at stake is best expressed by someone who speaks with the

voice of experience. Gemma is a disabled, lone mother of three children who also cares for her autistic nephew. She is part of the Changing Realities project. She writes that “for families like mine, living on a low income, we have run out of corners to cut...I sometimes find it difficult to imagine how my situation can get better, but it really has to because life should not be this hard....[The child poverty strategy] needs to be bold and make real change happen by investing in social security and providing more support with essential costs and for the additional needs of families with children. Next winter has to be better for families like mine. There is no other choice”.<sup>97</sup>

So often we hear ministers talk about the tough choices they have had to make. It is time to choose a transformative child poverty strategy and find the means of funding it. Otherwise, the costs of political choices will continue to be born by millions of parents and children who endure poverty every minute of every day.

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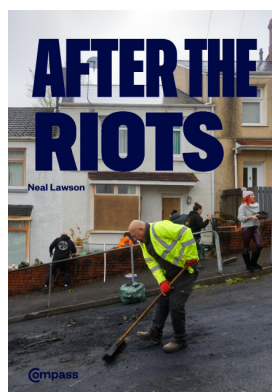
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