

Action for Children's Response to
Ending Child Poverty: Making it Happen



About Action for Children

Action for Children is one of the largest children's charities in the UK. We run nearly 450 services and work with nearly 170,000 children and young people across the UK, some of the most vulnerable in our society. We complement our role in promoting social justice through our services by lobbying and campaigning for change.

Action for Children is the leading UK provider of family and children's centres and preventive and intensive support to families with vulnerable children, including those in care, in trouble with the law, who are disabled and who have mental health problems.

Our purpose is to help the most vulnerable children and young people break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

Our vision is of a world where all children and young people have a sense of belonging, and are loved and valued. A world where they can fulfil their potential, shape their destiny and experience the joy of life.

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the government's strategy to eradicate child poverty by 2020. Action for Children is a member of the End Child Poverty Campaign and through our range of family and youth services understands the challenges of working to improve outcomes for the groups of children and young people we work with.

In general, we agree with the Government's overall vision and the recognition that to eradicate child poverty will require a broad approach that is not solely focussed on income levels and welfare reform. We agree with the main approach in the document that a 'solution' will need to focus increasing sustainable employment opportunities for parents; flexible financial support that supports parents role of supporting their children's emotional and practical needs; and increasing the access that children and young people have to services that can prevent poor outcomes associated with poverty in later life.

Throughout our response, Action for Children has adopted a definition of poverty that includes the impact that the experience of living in poverty, however measured by government, has on the collective emotional well-being of families and of individuals within them. Understanding the effects of poverty in terms of emotional as well as practical deprivation will be a central issue for government in the development of a wider response that includes safe, cohesive communities as part of the overall solution.

Action for Children's comments on individual chapters are provided below:

as long as it takes

Chapter 2 – The 2020 Vision

General Comments

The vision for eradicating child poverty by 2020 is for a wide range of services, including employment, training, childcare and health, to provide opportunities and support to families in order to break the cycle of deprivation that those experiencing poverty can be caught in.

In general training, childcare, and employment can be an effective way of helping some vulnerable families develop the capacity to escape poverty. However, the relationship between poverty and material deprivation is a complex one determined by a range of factors in addition to low income and a lack of employment. Much of what we understand by poverty and material deprivation supports a link to wider issues than worklessness. For example, according to the End Child Poverty Campaign over half of children living in a household currently defined as in poverty have at least one parent or carer that works.

Additional factors such as the emotional well being of families, their capacity to engage with services, as well as the size and structure of the family are also relevant to how they will engage with a service offer designed to help them out of material poverty. ECPC has also found that 43% of 'poor' children live in a household headed by a lone parent, and a similar number live in households with three or more siblings.

In developing a strategy to eradicate child poverty government will need to address the practical issues and benefits of encouraging all families into employment. Parents of disabled children are a group who can often find it difficult to balance caring responsibilities with employment commitments outside the home. According to DWP research *Disability and caring among families with children Family employment and poverty characteristics*, couples with a disabled child are less likely to both work, compared to those with no disabled child – and almost twice as many couples with a disabled child are workless, compared to those without.¹ With these families, and others with overriding caring responsibilities, we would question whether work is the only solution to meeting the 2020 goal and point out that some parents need support to remain in the home when this is necessary without having to risk living in poverty.

A successful 2020 vision therefore will need to ensure that such families receive the support required to enable them to meet the challenges of entering the employment market and that already marginalised children are supported both through services and by their families to avoid experiencing poverty later in life.

Specific comments

The structure of the 2020 Vision

Action for Children believes that one of the most pressing challenges for families (with children), and young people to access the opportunities outlined in *Making it Happen* is to overcome emotional well-being barriers such as self-esteem, self-confidence; depression and anxiety. Research commissioned by Action for Children has identified the importance of emotional wellbeing in determining social mobility. This is rising rapidly – emotional wellbeing being four and a half times more important as a factor in determining social mobility for those born in 1970 compared to those born in 1958. Every indicator suggests that it will be even more important

¹ Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No 460. *Disability and caring among families with children Family employment and poverty characteristics*. Stephen McKay and Adele Atkinson.
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep460.pdf>

as long as it takes

for children born now.² However, economic pressures, low income, poor housing conditions and overcrowding have all been shown to be associated with higher levels of family stress, less effective parenting skills and a higher risk of separation and divorce.³

Addressing the emotional capacity for families in poverty to take advantage of the service offer made to them through local authorities will be crucial if these are to be sustainable interventions:

- A central element to sustainable employment is that it involves work that is viable economically, is flexible given other pressures on particularly vulnerable and marginalised families, and that parents and young people are provided with the support necessary to overcome the physical and psychological barriers that lead to long-term disengagement and unemployment.
- Through our work with vulnerable families (especially early years services – children and family centres) Action for Children understands that parents with young children and young often need additional support to help them develop the confidence to enter the employment market. Sustainability in terms of increasing the percentage of those of working age in employment has a number of angles relevant to poverty, including developing the self-esteem and confidence of both families and young people who have been out of work for extended periods, or have never worked at all. This is especially the case for second and third generation unemployed families where the capacity to work often requires programmes where young people involved can ‘learn to learn’.
- Interventions to enable the families most at risk of long term disengagement to take up employment opportunities will therefore need to offer additional, practical support to prevent a welfare to work approach to eradicating poverty from becoming counter-productive. A group particularly vulnerable to future low income and limited employment opportunities are children and young people in the looked after system. Additional support is required for children and young people to ensure that they avoid outcomes typically associated with this group, including low educational attainment, unresolved emotional issues, and a general lack of skills required to meet the challenges of transition to independent living once they leave care. In developing the 2020 vision government should work to include existing strategies to improve outcomes for particularly at-risk groups such as care leavers through *Care Matters*, and young offenders in the forthcoming *Youth Crime Action Plan*.

Are there any other areas that have been missed?

Health

Although employment is not a blanket solution to child poverty and in some cases there will be genuine reasons for parents to remain in the home full-time with their children, a number of additional areas in *Making it Happen* should be included. Health for instance has an impact on employability and will be a major factor in determining the ability of central government and devolved administrations to meet indicators associated with PSA 8 (and equivalents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) in relation to increasing access to employment for vulnerable groups. A parent or young persons readiness for employment will be dependent to some extent on schemes to support people into work where they have physical or mental health

² Julia Margo and Sonia Sodha (2007) *Get happy: children and young people's emotional wellbeing*, Action for Children – research based on analysis of the British Cohort Study.

³ Bartley M (2006) *capability and Resilience: Beating the Odds* (London: UCL Department of Epidemiology and Public health)

as long as it takes

issues that require additional support. Health issues arising from alcohol misuse will be particularly relevant given that many claimants of employment benefit with alcohol dependency problems will be from an older age group than those with histories of illegal substance misuse, and more likely to have dependent children.

The link between child poverty and the amount of time a parent is in work is particularly pronounced. Parents out of work as a result of a Long-Standing Illness (LSI) are, for instance, more likely to have children with a Limiting Long-Standing Health Condition (LLSC). According to DWP research *Health, disability, caring and employment* parents whose children had an LLSC were far more likely than average to comment that they could not find a job with the right hours (14 per cent compared with eight per cent).⁴

Education

There are strong links between poverty and educational achievement both in terms of a parents ability to enter sustainable employment and a young persons ability to break the cycle of poverty through future employment opportunities. According to the DWP survey *The circumstances of persistently poor families with children: Evidence from the Families and Children Study* (FACS)⁵:

“Although the causal relationships are complex, the correlations between poverty, social class and poor educational attainment are strong. For example, poor children are one-third as likely to get five good GCSEs as their wealthier classmates (DfES,2005).

One factor determining a child or young persons educational attainment is the practical and emotional support available within the family home. Many families living on, or below, the 60% of mean household income threshold face a number of pressures affecting their capacity to actively support and encourage children through education. Meeting the challenge of capacity building within families in this way is key to ensuring that educational achievement is improved for all children and young people.

The education system above all needs to be responsive to the pressures facing parents and children in order to identify potential problems early on and notify the appropriate service. It is essential to the success of the 2020 vision that targeted support is available for all children and young people at risk of poor outcomes if the obvious link between low educational attainment and poverty is to be broken. General observations on the role of education include:

- Schools need to be supported to work more effectively with parents, other providers and children's services.
- Effective engagement with voluntary sector providers will be an essential component of this mix ensuring that the 21st century school system can reach out to all children and young people and be enabled to respond to their individual needs.

A strong role for parents remains key however, and it needs to be clear that schools are not a substitute for good parenting. A lot of support is needed to prepare children for education –

⁴ Department for Work and Pensions, Research Report No 461. *Health, disability, caring and employment: Longitudinal analysis*. Adele Atkinson, Andrea Finney and Stephen McKay.

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep461.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep487.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rports2007-2008/rrep487.pdf>

as long as it takes

many families pass on the negative experiences of school to their children and it is the role of a wider range of mainstream and targeted service to work together to break this cycle.

Chapter 3 – Driving progress against the vision

General Comments

Action for Children understands that poverty and material deprivation have an eroding affect on the well-being of families as well as a practical impact on the ability of poorer families to meet basic needs.

Given our experience of working with families in extreme social exclusion we understand that poor emotional well-being can persist despite material improvements that may occur in a household as a result of employment or better access to benefits.

Many households experiencing poverty, especially those in rural areas who are faced with high additional costs around transport, low wages, and seasonal work, are headed by a wage earner. We feel that a focus on the material element to a deprivation or income measure will not fully capture the experiences of families in poverty.

The real impact of poverty is seen in how it affects the ability of families to form plans for the future and how children's aspirations and potential is nurtured and realised. Therefore a target that allows 5-10 per cent of children to remain in relative low income by 2020, and is based on an income or material measures is insufficient because it fails to ensure that the cycle of poverty is broken for children and young people who will be parents themselves in 2020.

Specific Comments

Measuring Poverty: income vs. deprivation

Action for Children believes that a deprivation measure would more realistically capture the wider negative outcomes that families in poverty experience. Action for Children's own experience of delivering services through our children and family centres is that emotional well-being is an important element of a families overall capacity to break the cycle of poverty. According to one Sure Start User in London '*You can't give your children confidence and security if you're not confident and secure yourself.*'⁶

The outcomes related to poverty are not only those connected to material deprivation and limited resources, but wider outcomes associated with emotional breakdown within the family – often leading to a lack of capacity to take up opportunities where these exist.

An issue for many families, especially young parents, is not lack of income generally, but an understanding of budgeting and the capacity to manage the influence of young children on spending decisions. We understand through our work with children and family centres that an outcomes associated with the experience of poverty is of families and children as pressures on budgets forces difficult choices about spending priorities.

Action for Children has experience in working with vulnerable families to develop key financial literacy skills through our Financial Futures partnership with Barclays Bank Plc. Through Financial Futures we run a series of skills workshops throughout England, based at family and children's centres, that help parents and young people to develop the ability to manage

⁶Action for Children Briefing: Early years services and emotional wellbeing – what parents want, February 2008

budgets, set up bank accounts, and make choices about how to prioritise spending decisions on limited funds. Additional support includes practical help in eating healthily on a limited budget, setting up direct debits, and understanding the value of saving.

Action for Children's work with financial literacy has help to identify the pressures that many poorer families face often as a result of poor parenting skills, low levels of physical or emotional maturity, and a lack of general life-skills. Some parents lacking these skills can respond to the pressure from their children by diverting scarce household income to ensure their children have the latest clothes or toys, often to avoid their child being singled out and bullied. According to one Action for Children practitioner:

"... all children feel they need to belong. We live in such a pressurised society, that we as parents must give our children the latest "must haves" for fear of them being bullied or stigmatised." (Tullibody Family Project).

Feedback from Action for Children services describes a number of similar experiences of young parents:

- One young mother who spent the full £500 maternity grant on designer baby clothes as she felt that this was the most important purchase she could make.⁷
- Another young mother insisted on Nike trainers for her toddler saying that she "*didn't want him to grow up being bullied*", even though he would have been too young for that to have occurred.⁸
- One young woman who did not live with her son spent vast amounts of money on his birthday and Christmas presents as she felt that this best illustrated what a committed and good parent she was, rather than meeting him and taking him to the park.⁹

The success of a 'broad front' in tackling child poverty is therefore dependent on families receiving the additional support to build capacity within households to encourage the emotional development of children and young people. This will require a long-term support to families and children to enable them to take advantage of employment, training and skills development opportunities.

Chapter 4 - Tackling child poverty in local communities

General Comments

The 2020 vision's broad-front approach to eradicating child poverty means that Local authorities are already well-placed to provide the range of services that many families at risk of experiencing poverty will require by 2020. Action for Children believes that the existing duties to promote well-being offer a far more powerful response to child poverty in the long term if government helped local authorities across the UK to realise their well-being responsibilities through working with partner agencies.

The range of services currently commissioned by local authorities and supported by statutory duties to promote well-being include all those that Action for Children understands are necessary for a coherent 2020 offer to be made locally: education; transport; employability (in particular E2E services); housing; family support (including targeted and intensive support where necessary), and extended services through Sure Start Children's Centres for example.

⁷ NCH Next Step Supported Housing Project

⁸ NCH Next Step Supported Housing Project

⁹ NCH Next Step Supported Housing Project

as long as it takes

Action for Children therefore generally favours a new statutory duty on local authorities only where this would ensure that local authorities have regard to a whole-family approach to poverty. This would mean ensuring that where parents faced significant barriers to accessing services or opportunities that would allow them to break the cycle of poverty for their children local authorities had a duty to ensure that these needs were met.

The role of Local Authorities in delivering the 2020 vision

The ability of local authorities to tackle child poverty is limited by the lack of co-ordination within Children's Trusts and the resultant lack of strategic engagement with providers, third sector organisations amongst them, who have the ability to ensure that local authorities can access the most hard to reach parts of the community. Action for Children would hope that the forthcoming Child Poverty Bill will include measures to improve this situation.

We are also aware that the government needs to be clear on how the 2020 strategy will relate to the devolved administrations and measures to address the issue of child poverty outside of England. Government will need to be clear on how the vision will be implemented given the different levels of devolution across the four nations in respect of the services that support the 2020 vision.

In terms of the role of local authorities Action for Children as a result of our own experience agrees with the findings in the recent Audit Commission report *Are we there yet?* that despite improved collaborative working arrangements "... *there is little evidence that children's trusts ... have improved outcomes for children and young people or delivered better value for money, over and above locally agreed cooperation*".¹⁰ We would hope that future legislation and plans for implementing the vision take account of the current problems in joint commissioning and planning and that these are disseminated across the devolved regions across the UK.

There is a major role for organisation operating in the third sector to support government in delivering this vision. Given the characteristics of families and young people most at risk of experiencing poverty third sector organisations are well placed to engage the most marginalised communities. In particular, we would welcome further engagement on the role that third sector organisations have to play in the commissioning of services that will enable local authorities to meet the existing duties to promote welfare that they already have (for instance through the Children Act 2004).

What currently prohibits the effective engagement is a tendency among local commissioners to understand the tender process as a procurement one – excluding organisations with local knowledge in the design of services to ensure they have the maximum 'reach'.

Action for Children believes that the emotional well-being impacts of poverty create significant internal barriers, in both individuals and within family structures that any new duty will need to address. If government adopts a deprivation measure to deliver on the 2020 vision, then any new duty to on local authorities to promote this will need to make explicit existing obligations to ensure that parents are given the support that they need to support children and young people living with them - whether this entails accessing employability services; access to transport; adequate housing; or access to mental/physical health services.

¹⁰ Are we there yet?: Improving governance and resource management in children's trusts. Audit Commission Local government National report, October 2008. <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/Products/NATIONAL-REPORT/17AEBDA5-657E-4ef7-80BB-92214D4C04FF/AreWeThereYet29Oct08REP.pdf> Summary: *Are we there yet?*, p3.

Any additional duty imposed on local authorities in future legislation needs to compel them to not only assess levels of poverty in their local areas, but crucially, provide a robust monitoring and reporting mechanism (to individual devolved assemblies as well as the UK Parliament for English Local Authorities), to ensure that the problem is being properly addressed.

Jason Pollard
Policy Officer
March 2009

as long as it takes