

# Tackling Child Poverty and Improving Life Chances: Consulting on a New Approach



## Action for Children response

February 2011

Action for Children is a UK-wide charity that speaks out for the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people, and supports them to break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. Action for Children helps nearly 156,000 children, young people and their families through nearly 420 projects across the UK. We also promote social justice by lobbying and campaigning for change.

Everyday, Action for Children helps some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded children and young people across the country. The ability to develop resilience in the early years has a major impact on the later development of the emotional and social skills that enable a child to gain a good education, qualifications and employment. This consultation response is based upon our experience working with vulnerable children, young people and families on the ground. As such it draws on our expertise as practitioners, independent evaluations of our services and academic research we have commissioned to gather further broader evidence on effective service interventions to work with children and families to break cycles of deprivation.

### Key points:

- We know from our every day work that lifting families out of deprivation can not be achieved by concentrating on family income alone. By providing targeted support to families at an early stage we can successfully break intergenerational cycles of deprivation.
- However, without addressing the economic roots of social immobility, even the most progressive family support policies will not overcome structural disadvantage. We therefore strongly welcome the reaffirmation of the Government's commitment to ending child poverty by 2020 in the Coalition Agreement.
- We now need to take positive steps to ensure delivery. The approach being consulted upon is grounded on the ability to deliver support to the most vulnerable through existing infrastructures. In light of this it seems ironic that vast numbers of those early years' services able to identify early and act on the needs of vulnerable children are in imminent danger of closing.
- Action for Children calls on the government to act now to ensure the infrastructure to deliver their aspirations is not lost.
- The link between early identification of need, and the local commissioning of targeted interventions to address those needs and improve outcomes for the most vulnerable children, must be protected and reinforced.
- It is critical that we maintain a focussed and steadfast determination to end child poverty. In addition, the government needs to make necessary investment in early intervention services to break intergenerational cycles. A double-sided approach is required if we are to end child poverty and improve children's life chances.

## Question 1: What do you think are the key points from the Frank Field Review which the Government needs to incorporate into the child poverty strategy?

Action for Children believes that a double sided approach is necessary both to address the impact of child poverty in the here and now, while simultaneously working to improve children's life chances in the future. This is not a case of either or, we need both.

*as long as it takes*

Frank Field's review makes an important contribution to this debate, especially his focus on the importance of the early years and the principle of developing a mechanism to pick up on the early identification of need. The evidence for such an approach is overwhelming and does not need to be repeated here.

Action for Children urges the adoption of a universal test (or assessment) of children's early development to identify any additional needs at age 2 (broader than current 2-2.5 year old health checks) along the lines suggested in the Frank Field review (and supported by the Allen review). Any needs assessment must fully reflect the broad range of cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social and physical indicators, taking a life chances approach, with a focus on wellbeing.

Such an assessment must then inform joined-up local action. To achieve this, the concept of the new life chances measures should inform strengthened Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and through them local social care and health commissioning processes. This crucial link between the early identification of need, effective local partnership arrangements, and then the commissioning and delivery of targeted interventions for the most vulnerable children, must be made transparent.

To complete the loop will require the introduction of outcomes based commissioning supported by the introduction of a payment by results system that delivers the re-investment of the savings made by early intervention approaches.

For this to become more than rhetoric, the government must hold local authorities accountable for delivering the following outcomes for children living in their area:

- Improved emotional wellbeing (and hence the prevention of abuse and neglect)
- Good health
- Attainment and education

The structures and mechanisms for delivery of these outcomes will of course be for local areas to determine.

Action for children has undertaken a detailed review of our impact and the outcomes we have achieved for the vulnerable children, young people and families we work with. From this we have identified common strands of good practice. These are broader than just the delivery of a small selection of well evidenced programmes, but rather speak to the service mix across a local areas and the skills and capabilities of individuals and organisations.

The common strands of effective practice, drawn from Action for Children's evidence base, are as follows:

- Use of relationships over time, particularly outreach to work successfully with the most vulnerable and excluded – to provide consistent and persistent relationships with the family
- Commitment to both intensive and long-term support where necessary – enabling localities to develop an effective continuum of support
- Flexibility to provide services to meet need through intensive interventions
- Sound basis in safeguarding principles and procedures
- Commitment to ensuring the achievement of qualitative outcomes over and above success in meeting timescales and other process measures
- Planning on the basis of the richness of research in the field and on the quality of human experience expressed by service users
- Stable staffing within services

## **Question 2: What are your thoughts on the best way to incorporate early intervention into the child poverty strategy?**

Action for Children is delighted with the government's on-going focus on early intervention and the widespread recognition that only an early intervention approach will achieve the improvement in children's life chances we are all seeking.

Families need support to break inter-generational cycles of deprivation. The evidence shows that early interventions with very young children, and with vulnerable parents, can break long term negative behavioural patterns. In our '*Backing the Future*' report (produced with the New Economics Foundation) we therefore called for a significant shift in investment from picking up the pieces to early intervention and prevention. The report shows how the provision of targeted early intervention and support services for disadvantaged children and young people is essential to encourage the development of the skills and capabilities that increasingly underpin social mobility.

Drawing on our stands of good practice (set out in our response to Question 1) it is clear that early intervention requires us to value the importance of emotional well-being and the role of the relationship with a vulnerable child or young person. To meet needs effectively requires a flexible and adaptive approach. It is vital that when looking at best practice, commissioners remember that individual interventions (or evidence based programmes) do not exist in isolation. Rather decisions must be based on a sound understanding of local need, of the pathway for individual service users, and the interplay between the different services available in a locality.

We have concerns that promising local innovations will not be able to meet the exacting standards of evidence being suggested in the interim Allen Report. We simply cannot afford to develop a system which replaces bureaucratic performance indications for local authorities, with a similarly bureaucratic external validation regime. Providers must be required to understand and measure impact, but in a way which is both proportionate and supported.

Our primary concern is that the recommendations set out in Graham Allen's interim report do not go far enough. To achieve the necessary shift towards an early intervention approach that will improve child's life changes and break intergenerational cycles Action for Children recommends:

### **Local government is held accountable to a new early intervention outcomes framework**

- The government must reform the statutory framework for children's services to ensure early intervention is on a par with child protection and responses to children in care.
- In support of this the government must hold local authorities accountable for delivering the following outcomes for children:
  - Improved emotional wellbeing (preventing neglect)
  - Good health
  - Attainment and education

### **Early identification and assessment of need**

- Early years professionals should adopt a universal assessment of children's early development to identify any additional needs at the earliest possible stage
- The universal assessment must then inform strengthened Joint Strategic Needs Assessments, with local areas using Community Budgets to commission effective early intervention services

### **New funding arrangements**

- New funding arrangements to protect and facilitate early intervention approaches must be introduced
- The results of the assessment of children's development must inform the draw down of local authority funding from national government, as well as the allocation of resources locally. Entitlements to provision must be tied to the identification of need in the early years

- Central government must take a lead by developing a joined up approach to early intervention that works across departmental boundaries. Within this, departments and agencies that make savings from early intervention must be required to invest in early intervention services

### Effective delivery

- Local authorities must offer long-term (five year) service contracts to ensure cost effectiveness, retention of staff, local/community service impact and delivery of payment by results.
- In order to enable the best providers to come forward, introduction of payment by results must incorporate a front-loaded payment for delivery and bonuses for results achieved which are then reinvested.
- Within the payment by results framework rigorous criteria must be introduced to ensure that services are delivered to the intended target population (those that need them the most).

### Question 3: Do you agree with our working definition of socio-economic disadvantage?

Action for Children worked with Oxford Brookes University to establish a definition of child deprivation. The researchers used an amalgamation of definitions of material deprivation coined by Townsend, Mack and Lansley, Sen, the Indices of Material Deprivation, the Children Act 1989 (s.17) and the OECD (2007), which defined material deprivation as, ‘the inability for individuals or households to afford those consumption goods and activities that are typical in a society at a given point in time, irrespective of people’s preferences with respect to these items’.

We would urge the government to use the following definition of deprivation to assist in measuring and reducing child poverty in order to improve life chances for children:

*‘A child is deprived if he is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining the standards of health, housing, environment, access to services, safety, education and employment enjoyed by those living above 60% of median income.’<sup>1</sup>*

As such the measures of poverty need to look more broadly at what services and resources are available, how capable families are to achieve them and what outcomes are attained in order to ensure a good standard of life for all and equitable life chances. Action for Children believes that improved emotional wellbeing, good health, attainment and education are all crucial outcomes that we should measure in order to assess local success in breaking the cycle of deprivation.

For many families living in poverty, their problems cannot be solved by money alone - they need intensive support to overcome their hardships. In the long term the eradication of child poverty must include access to a wider range of services which families in need require to lift them out of poverty. Services such as employability and training schemes, child care; adequate housing especially in rural areas and transport are all vital ingredients of the long term, viable solution to poverty.

### Question 4: Are these the right areas for the child poverty strategy to cover?

We would support the Government’s intention to take a broader approach, using the child poverty strategy to set out how we can work together to tackle the underlying causes of intergenerational disadvantage, as well as static income based measures. The strategy must also consider which children face the highest risks of socio-economic disadvantage and how key policies affect them.

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<sup>1</sup> Ritchie, C.; Appleton, J. (2009) “Effectiveness of interventions in assisting individual and groups of children to cope with deprivation.”, Oxford Brookes University

Given how crucial emotional wellbeing is to children in their ability to achieve and succeed and cope with adversity, Action for Children believes a key focus for measuring improvements in life chances should be how well early intervention is embedded in local areas. Without support for disadvantaged children, the skills and capabilities needed that underpin social mobility will remain underdeveloped and we will never be able to break intergenerational cycles of neglect and deprivation.

The strategy will need to incorporate clear outcomes and indicators for each building block, with appropriate milestones built in to ensure progress towards the 2020 target.

### **Question 5: Do you agree that the role and the remit of the Child Poverty Commission should be broadened to reflect the new approach?**

A refocused Child Poverty Commission broadened to look at both poverty and life chances would need to ensure that Ministers, not independent bodies or advisors, are held accountable for the strategy to tackle child poverty.

### **Question 6: What do you think makes the most difference to the life chances of children?**

Research commissioned by Action for Children and undertaken by IPPR in 2007<sup>2</sup> showed that emotional wellbeing became four and a half times more important in determining social mobility of children born in 1970 compared with similar children born in 1958.

Emotional wellbeing means having empathy, confidence and self awareness. This encompasses the ability to make and keep relationships; use and enjoy solitude; become aware of others and to empathise with them; play and learn; develop a sense of right and wrong; and face problems and setbacks and learn from them. Emotional wellbeing is key to successful adaptation to adult life and is far more than the absence of mental illness:

- 44% of those with emotional disorders fall significantly behind at school
- 35% of those with emotional disorders reported difficulty in making friends.
- Around a quarter of those with an emotional disorder are suicidal.

Our focus is on improving life chances and enhancing emotional wellbeing through making the case for early intervention and family support. Research shows that parenting is the most critical influence on children's lives. Supporting effective parenting is crucial in improving long term outcomes for the most vulnerable children and closing the gap between them and their peers.

### **Question 7: Are there additional measures, compatible with our fiscal approach, which could help us combat poverty and improve life chances?**

We need a new settlement to enable local service responses to embed early intervention, increase efficiency and break the cycles of deprivation and neglect in the UK (for details please see our response to Question 2).

We are aware that without addressing the economic roots of social immobility, even the most progressive family support policies will not overcome structural disadvantage. For example, without improved apprenticeships schemes to support the most vulnerable young people there is a risk that those with the potential to become highly skilled, rather than academically successful, will end up in low-paid, unsatisfying employment.

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<sup>2</sup> *Get happy: children and young people's emotional wellbeing*, Margo, J and Sodha, S (2007) Commissioned by Action for Children

The Child Poverty Commission will need to take into account the impact of funding decisions currently being taken. We are concerned that decisions taken in the Comprehensive Spending Review will add to, rather than reduce, child poverty. Action for Children is adamant that vulnerable and neglected children and young people must not be the ones to bear the human cost of the country's deficit.

The approach being consulted upon on this paper is grounded on the ability to deliver support to the most vulnerable through existing infrastructures. In light of this it seems ironic that vast numbers of those early years' services able to identify early and act on the needs of vulnerable children are in imminent danger of closing. Action for Children calls on the government to act now to ensure the infrastructure to deliver their aspirations is not lost.

## **Question 8: What further steps can be taken to help local authorities and partners to reduce poverty and improve life chances?**

Again, as per our response to Questions 1 and 2.

A range of work is being undertaken to demonstrate the social and financial rewards of shifting to an early intervention approach. Work is needed to highlight and embed this philosophy within local authority's thinking on needs assessment and the subsequent commissioning of services that have the greatest impact.

For example, Social Return on Investment evaluations of three Action for Children services undertaken by the New Economics Foundation (nef) graphically set out the benefits to society as well as to individuals and communities of effective early intervention services to address social problems. For every £1 invested annually in Action for Children's targeted services designed to catch problems early, society benefits by between £7.60 and £9.20. By the end of year three, the state has recouped its investment in the project. In addition, for every £1 invested in an Action for Children children's centre, a forecast social return to society of £4.60 is expected to be generated.<sup>3</sup>

## **Question 9: How can the voluntary, community and private sectors contribute most effectively to local approaches to tackling child poverty and improving life chances?**

Evidence collated by Action for Children across our services shows that the use of an effective professional relationship over time is the element within all our provision that has the greatest impact on outcomes for children. We have therefore commissioned a study to define the key aspects of an effective professional relationship (with a vulnerable parent) that are correlated to improved outcomes for children. Among the outputs of this research will be the development of a new framework and correlated guidance.

In addition, our research programmes have found that robust outreach, whereby project staff make individual contact with families in the community in their own homes, is essential to make a reality of access for those families who are seen as being the most "hard to reach".

The provision of effective impactful professional relationships and outreach are both areas where the voluntary sector has a unique contribution to make.

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<sup>3</sup> Action for Children and nef [2009] *Backing the Future: Why investing in children is good for us all* [www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content/561/Backing-the-future](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content/561/Backing-the-future)

Action for Children invests significantly in research in order to understand the difference we make. For example, we have commissioned King's College London to investigate the impact that our Sure Start Children's Centres (SSCC) have on outcomes for vulnerable children. The interim key themes identified by the researchers are very promising:

- Centre-based work with adults who are parents means that individuals can be supported in developing their capacity as parents; as well as adults, including facilitating their engagement with and entry in to the labour market.
- Children's centres contribution to enhancing the economic capital of the family but also the release of social and psychological 'capital' – e.g. through access to employment and training opportunities.
- Helping develop the confidence of adults to undertake good quality parenting is a key building block in the building of community capacity.
- The Action for Children agency partnership style, working with other local agencies, maximizes service responsiveness for families, and can help protect local family support capacity, by engaging with small/medium size agencies.
- Children's centres have evolved a sophisticated range of mechanisms to maximize "reach" in even the most challenging circumstances.

We would be very happy to share the results of this or any of our programme of research, as well as the work we have undertaken on evidencing outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and families.

Kate Mulley  
Action for Children