



Child poverty: the crisis we can't keep ignoring

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Foreword by Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England

Child poverty will continue to rise during this Parliament unless the Government commits to a bold, broad response. We are one of the most prosperous nations yet the number of children living in poverty is shocking and it is a cause for national shame. Child poverty has long been a fundamental problem facing Britain, and holding back millions of children. Even before Covid there were two fundamental facts that show how serious the situation has become:



- 1) Children are the group of the population most likely to be in poverty, and child poverty has been rising in absolute and relative terms for nearly a decade during which pensioner poverty has fallen consistently and dramatically.
- 2) The gap between children eligible for free school meals and their peers is now widening, after decades of continuous progress in closing this gap.

In other words, even before Covid levels of child poverty in England were getting higher, just at the outcomes for children growing up in poverty are getting worse.

The Covid crisis has shone a light on the realities this translates to: children going hungry and families – many of them working – relying on charity and living week to week. The strains on family life and on children are enormous and the impact of children's development and life chances is clear. Some of the stories I hear from families and children wouldn't be out of place in a 19th century Dickens novel. From the children whose parents won't let them go to school because they couldn't afford to self-isolate if their child got Covid, to the children who spent lockdown waiting on the doorstep for their school to deliver lunch – the only meal of the day. Or the schools desperately trying to raise 50p per child to provide a morning bagel, knowing they can use the leftovers to feed Mum.

This is a problem we must not ignore any longer. Yet some still find the whole issue too squeamish to confront, bristling at the very use of the phrase 'child poverty'. It is not just the Government - neither of the two main political parties fought the last General Election with plans to reduce child poverty, despite the fact it had been rising for most of the past decade. The Labour party's manifesto would have created the biggest increase in Government spending on record, but no reduction in child poverty and the Conservative party manifesto was predicted to create a rise in child poverty to the highest levels on record. This was all pre-Covid.

This is particularly shocking given there are millions of families who rely on the decisions politicians make to help them get by. Too often though policy changes to help people in poverty are made as a result of short-term political embarrassment. The lack of an overarching long-term plan to reduce child poverty from either of the main parties is no longer sustainable given the scale of the problem and the long-term impact poverty has on children's wellbeing and life chances.

We know child poverty is not just about the immediate material conditions in which children live. It also defines their life chances. In several towns and cities in England, more than half of children growing up

getting free school meals will get to age 19 without a “Level 2 qualification” – 5 GCSEs or the equivalent in technical qualifications or an apprenticeship. This means 14yrs in education, a £100,000 spent, and almost nothing to show for it. This is the defining nature of child poverty in England, and what creates an inter-generational poverty trap.

These problems will worsen as a result of the Covid crisis. Poverty has already increased as a result of Covid-19, and is likely to increase still further over the next 18-months. However, I believe there has been a renewed public consciousness of poverty, linked to a desire to ‘build back better’ by addressing some of the issues that manifested more clearly during Covid. Child poverty is one such issue.

The school meal campaign, spearheaded by the footballer Marcus Rashford, showed how child poverty played strongly in the national consciousness. This creates a political imperative to act that had been seemingly absent over much of the past decade.

There are actually two connected issues we need to address. Firstly, the number of children in poverty and secondly, the way being in poverty defines a child’s life chances.

Too often approaches to poverty look at either the first or second separately. Policy measures focus on increasing the incomes of the poorest, but fail to address the wider ramifications of growing up in poverty; or people believe that you can break the link between poverty and opportunity, without addressing the material conditions in which families are living.

The answer is that any approach to poverty needs to combine both. That is why we are publishing this broad set of contributions, showing how both these aims can be pursued, in unison.

It is because of the breadth of the task, that child poverty has sometimes been put in the ‘too difficult box’. That must stop. We need to embrace the challenge, because child poverty is not going away. It has blighted England for hundreds of years. It is deeply entrenched and very difficult to alleviate. But we shouldn’t see it as yesterday’s problem, with first Covid, and then automation, likely to cause huge disruption to the UK’s labour market, child poverty is likely to continue to be a problem for tomorrow as well as for today.

It is time to see child poverty as one of the four major political, economic and social challenges facing us, along with decarbonising our economy, providing health and social care to an aging population and preparing the labour market for automation. We need to treat it with the same seriousness, and even greater urgency.

Anne Longfield

Anne Longfield OBE
Children’s Commissioner for England

An overview of the contributions

This collection is in three sections.

The first section examines the need for Government to have an over-arching plan to tackle it. We begin with Baroness Stroud, Chair of the Social Metrics Commission, explaining the importance of Government understanding child poverty, its prevalence and its different manifestations. We then have former Prime Minister, Rt. Hon Tony Blair explaining the importance of an over-arching child poverty strategy which connects different elements of Government together. The Rt. Hon Stephen Timms MP, Chair of the DWP Select Committee, takes this further with a call for Government to return to an over-arching child poverty target which provides the underlying impetus for a series of further decisions. There has been a lot of focus on food poverty recently, but as Emma Revie of the Trussell Trust points out, "Child 'food poverty' is just one symptom of a wider injustice: poverty", and we need to look at this together.

A child poverty strategy needs to look both at the material conditions which bring about child poverty and the impact it has on children's life chances. Both are covered in Section Two which contains a range of suggestions as to what a child poverty strategy should contain. It begins with a stark warning from Rt. Hon Robert Halfon MP, Chair of the Education Select Committee of the need to focus on those children currently being left behind, and what we need to do now and in the future to help them. Ed Davies, from the Centre for Social Justice emphasises the role of the family in supporting children's education outcome, and draws the lessons from previous economic crises on the stress this places on families, and how we calls on immediate action to strengthen families. The need to support families, and the ways we can do it, is drawn out in two further contributions. Firstly, David Burrowes looks at the community infrastructure we need to address the social isolation which accompanies poverty and which has been shown to impact on children's development. Family Hubs, supporting families from maternity to early adulthood, can help families help their children. This theme is taken up by Steve Chalk, Founder of Oasis schools and community hubs, who talks about the need to work with deprived communities to help themselves. Of course, the state can support communities and families by working with them, as explained by Charlotte Ramsden, of the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

Finally, Section Three looks at the relationship between work and poverty for families. Helen Barnard, from the Joseph Roundtree Foundation, opens this by discussing the barriers to work as a way out of poverty for families. This leads into our final contribution, from Hannah Slaughter at the Resolution Foundation who talks about the relationship between work and social security in helping families out of poverty.

A note on the contributions

Each of these is an individual contribution. The Children's Commissioner has not edited, or endorsed, any of the individual contributions. Nor has any author edited or endorsed the other contributions. Rather, we asked authors to write a contribution on one aspect they would like to see in an over-arching child poverty strategy. Taken together, the contributions have lots of overlapping themes, but also a huge breadth of individual ideas, concepts and details.

An introduction on child poverty in numbers

Income poverty means living in a household without enough money. There has always been debate about what counts as “enough” but by any currently accepted definition, millions of children in the UK live in poverty.

Growing up in poverty doesn't necessarily mean an unhappy childhood, but it can make life a lot harder. In a [survey](#) we carried out last year, 21% of children listed “not having enough money” as one of their top 3 worries and 5% listed “not having enough food or clothes”. Children in poverty are more likely to miss out on celebrations, leisure activities and school trips. One 12 year old child we spoke as part of the [consultation](#) for our last business plan talked said:

Number of children in poverty, UK 2018/19

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Absolute, before housing costs | 2.4 million |
| Relative, before housing costs | 2.8 million |
| Absolute, after housing costs | 3.7 million |
| Relative, after housing costs | 4.2 million |

Source: HBAI, 2018/19 (latest release)

“

Like you're the only one that's not going [on a school trip], you'll kind of feel sad and upset... and people will be asking you are you going to and you wouldn't be able to answer, or some people would maybe lie, but really they know they're not going. It really hurts them.

”

National median annual earnings for all adults:

£30,500

Median annual earnings among adults aged 28 who were on FSM at age 16:

£13,500

Not only does poverty bring material hardship for children, it harms their future life chances. At every stage of education, poorer children do worse than their more affluent peers. As a result, they are more likely to enter adulthood with fewer opportunities: [our research](#) shows that children on Free School Meals (FSM) are more than twice as likely as their peers to leave education without a Level 2 Qualification (e.g. a pass at GCSE). Recent work by the [Social Mobility Commission](#) showed that for pupils in England eligible for FSM at age 16, median annual earnings were just £13,500 by age 28 (or £260/week) compared to the [UK national median](#) of £30,500 (or £585/week).

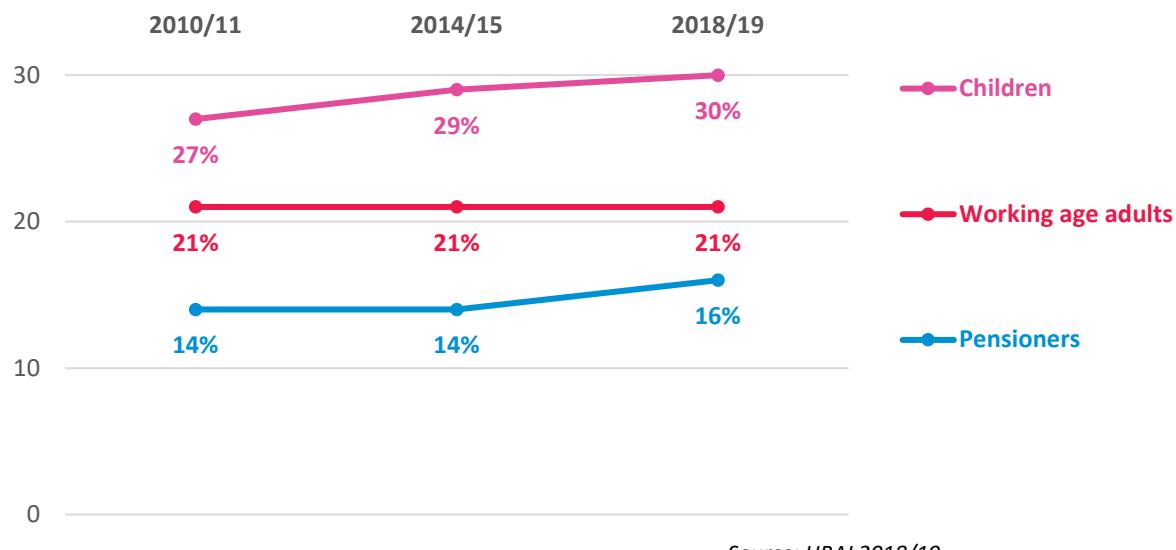
| Measure | Children eligible for FSM | All other children | Difference |
|---|---------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Proportion of children achieving a good level of development at age 5 ¹ | 57% | 74% | 17ppts |
| Proportion of children meeting expected standard for reading writing and maths age 10-11 ² | 47% | 68% | 19ppts |
| Proportion of children achieving between 9 and 4 on English and Maths at GCSE age 15-16 ³ | 41% | 69% | 27ppts |

¹ EYFS 2018, from Social Mobility Commission, [Social mobility in Great Britain - state of the Nation 2018 to 2019](#)

² Department for Education, [National curriculum assessments: key stage 2, 2019 \(revised\)](#)

³ Department for Education, [Key stage 4 performance 2019 \(revised\)](#)

% in relative low income after housing costs, UK



Children are more likely than any other age group to be living in poverty. In 2018/19 – well before the pandemic – 30% of children in the UK were living in relative low income after housing costs, compared to 21% of working-age adults and 16% of pensioners. This has been true by every measure in every year since 2008/09.⁴

Even before the pandemic, child poverty was rising. In 2010/11 there were 3.6 million children living in relative poverty in the UK (after housing costs). By the start of the Anne Longfield's term as Children's Commissioner, in 2014/15, the number had risen to 3.9 million; in the most recent figures (2018/19) it was 4.2 million (or 30% of children).

The last pre-Covid forecasts projected that child poverty would climb to record levels. In 2017, [the IFS projected](#) the percentage of children in relative poverty (after housing costs) would rise from 29% in 2014/15 to 36% in 2020/21. In 2019, [the Resolution Foundation predicted](#) the same figure would reach 37% by 2023/24, equivalent to 5.2 million children. Both projections would have seen the child poverty rate rise higher than the previous peak of 34% in the 1990s. The uncertainty of the pandemic means there are no more up-to-date projections available, but Covid-19 is likely to have added to the existing pressures driving child poverty upward.

Covid-19 has disrupted employment and reduced family incomes. 370,000 people in the UK were made redundant between August and October 2020, compared to 118,000 in the same three months a year before.⁵ Median family incomes in the UK had fallen 4.5% by May 2020 compared to 2019/20.⁶

UK economic indicators in 2020

Redundancies

↑ 214%

Median incomes

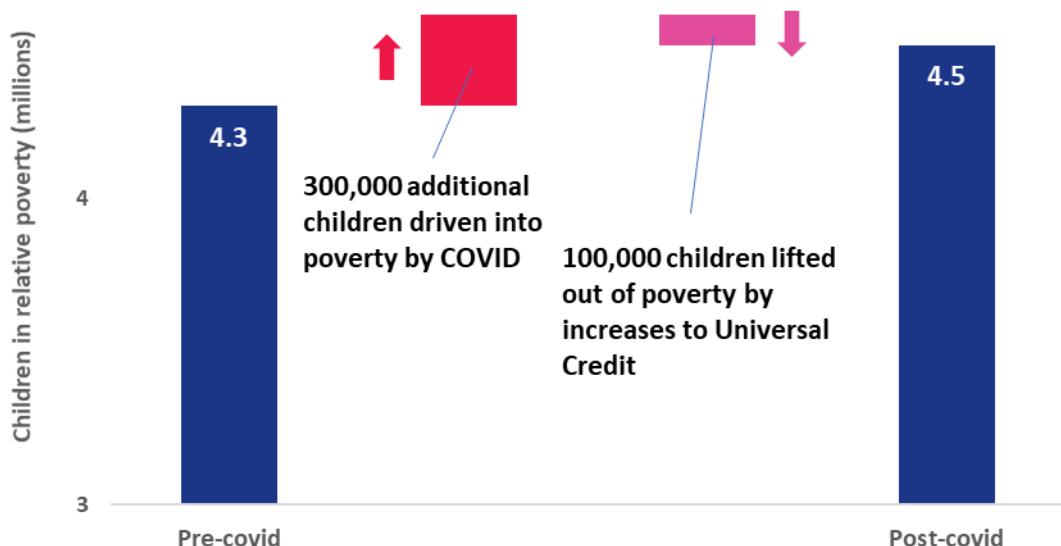
↓ 4.5%

⁴ Department for Work and Pensions, [Households below average income: 1994/95 to 2018/19](#)

⁵ ONS, [Redundancy level time series, December 2020](#)

⁶ Resolution Foundation, [The Living Standards Audit 2020](#)

The expanded social safety net has not been enough to limit a rise in poverty for children. As part of the initial economic response to the pandemic in March 2020, Universal Credit was made more generous (including a £20/week increase to the standard allowance), increasing the incomes of the 1.2 million families with children already on Universal Credit and better protecting the incomes of the additional 500,000 families who began claiming since the pandemic began.⁷



Source: [IPPR estimates](#) of impact of Covid and UC changes on child poverty in 2020

Despite these changes, [according to IPPR](#), the number of children in poverty still increased by 200,000 overall during 2020.



The £20 per week Universal Credit uplift is on track to be removed in April, pushing even more children into poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates that removing the £20 per week uplift (equivalent to just over £1,000 p.a.) would move 300,000 children into poverty immediately.⁸

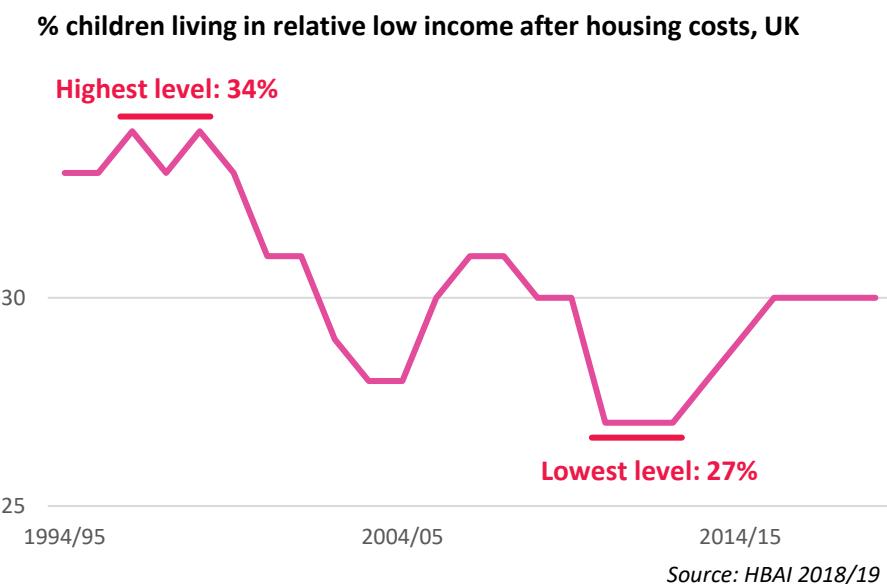
⁷ Department for Work and Pensions, Households on Universal Credit from the Stat-Xplore tool

⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, microsimulation modelling from [Autumn Budget – why we must keep the £20 social security lifeline](#)

This poverty has translated directly into food insecurity and hunger. In April 2020, the Trussell Trust saw an 89% increase in the number of emergency food parcels given out compared to the same month in 2019, including a 107% increase in the number of parcels given to children.⁹ Households with children were consistently more likely to experience food insecurity during the first lockdown.¹⁰ At the end of April 2020, 350,000 children in England were living in a household where someone had been forced to skip a meal in the last week and 249,000 were in families that had accessed foodbanks.¹¹

While the vaccine may herald the end of the public health crisis, employment – and prospects for child poverty – may take much longer to recover. The [Office of Budget Responsibility's November forecasts](#) for unemployment – made before the new variant was discovered or the third lockdown was ordered – anticipate a long, drawn-out recovery with unemployment above 6% until at least 2023. The unemployment rate is expected to be persistently higher than it was before the pandemic hit.

It is possible to reduce child poverty if government commits to it. Between 1996/97 and 2011/12, the rate of relative child poverty (after housing costs) fell from the then record high of 34% to 27%, the lowest level since comparable records began in the 1990s. During the same period, pensioner poverty fell from 29% to 13% and has been kept low since by the “triple-lock” policy on pensions.



⁹ The Trussell Trust, [Lockdown, lifelines and the long haul ahead: The impact of Covid-19 on food banks in the Trussell Trust network](#)

¹⁰ Food Foundation, [FOOD FOUNDATION POLLING: fifth survey](#)

¹¹ CCO analysis of *Understanding Society*



Baroness Philippa Stroud
Chief Executive, Legatum Institute

The Covid-19 pandemic is the most significant crisis of modern times. Since March, we have been bombarded with daily death statistics from this disease. But to focus only on the health implications of Covid-19 obscures its impact on the lives of millions, particularly those on the edge of poverty.

We can see with our own eyes that many of our more vulnerable families are struggling at this time, but the official data is all over the place. Since 2016 the Government has been making policy decisions without an official measure of poverty. What Government needs now is a way of measuring poverty that unites those on both the left and right and that acts as a tool to guide decision making at times of crisis. It is time to put an end to the political football that is poverty measurement and actually develop a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy that changes people's lived experience. The Social Metrics Commission (SMC) developed such a measure, which not only measures poverty but can highlight who is at risk of real disadvantage. The Government announced last May that it was using this work to create Experimental Poverty Statistics, but little has been heard of this since.

UK poverty is a significant long-term issue. The proportion of the population living in poverty has hardly changed over the last 20 years. The SMC's measure shows that, prior to the pandemic, more than one in five people in the UK (22%) lived in families in poverty. This means that 14.4 million people lived in poverty in the UK, including 4.5 million children.

Last week the Legatum Institute published its first analysis of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic in this poverty landscape. This uses our newly created Policy Simulator alongside the SMC's poverty measure to understand how the economic shock (including the furlough scheme, falling employment,

and decreased wages) and action the Government has taken have impacted those living in or at risk of poverty.

It goes without saying that the situation has not improved over the last few months, and that poverty has risen as a result of the pandemic. Compared to the situation where Covid-19 had not hit the country, 440,000 more people were in poverty this summer, and 690,000 more this winter, including a further 150,000 children. Nor have these impacts been evenly spread, being felt the hardest by young workers, those in relatively low-paying employment, and those working in sectors such as hospitality and retail.

The challenge is that whilst many have worked to draw attention to these issues, as a nation we are walking blind through a crisis with no agreed national definition of poverty and no agreed official measure of poverty. This means that whilst we are responding to some of the challenges that are arising from the pandemic, we are not able to take pre-emptive action to prevent hardship in a compassionate, accurate and timely way.

The Government has taken steps that have proved to be effective in protecting many families (including the additional £20 a week in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit and enhanced support for the self-employed on Universal Credit) and has shielded nearly 700,000 people from falling into poverty. But many still remain vulnerable to falling through the cracks.

If the Government were to adopt the SMC's framework, it would have access to a dashboard that could identify the pressure points in the welfare system in real time and develop emergency indicators for when different groups need specific support. This would facilitate a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy that would allow it to act proactively rather than reactively. In short, it could adopt an early intervention approach that shields families from the destructive impact of poverty.

In the wake of the economic damage that this last year has caused, we will no doubt see pressure on the Treasury to look to its welfare budgets for savings. This approach would be devastating for those living in poverty, particularly vulnerable children.

It is no surprise that the economic fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic has increased poverty in the UK. But the strength of reaction from the Government has insulated hundreds of thousands of people from poverty. This shows that, with the right tools and the right information, Government can ensure that, at a time of crisis, many of those who are vulnerable to poverty are protected. To ensure this continues as we begin to adapt to life after, or living with Covid-19, there is a clear need for the Government to push ahead with its creation of Experimental Poverty Statistics and to place a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy at the heart of its Covid-19 recovery response.



Tony Blair
Former Prime Minister

We need a national plan to eradicate child poverty

In 1999, I set out the government's path to end child poverty through a 20-year mission. While ambitious, long-term commitments help focus minds, that pledge made clear that we believed that tolerating child poverty was indefensible and it should – and could – be tackled head on.

In the years that followed, Labour governments took a million children out of poverty, with absolute and relative measures of child poverty falling significantly. But what made the difference was the fact that our commitment was driven by the centre of government and combined with carefully defined series actions, across a range of policy areas and departments.

We introduced tax credits and increased spending, resulting in an additional £18 billion on benefits for families with children. A child's early years are critically important to their social and educational development, so we brought in Sure Start. We increased support for childcare, increased maternity pay and leave and introduced paid paternity leave too. Spending on education increased dramatically and there were 40,000 more teachers in our schools by 2010, as did the number of young people going onto higher education.

It is to be deeply regretted that, the progress we made has been lost over the last ten years, with hundreds of Sure Start centres shut and a benefits freeze which the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has cited as the biggest single driver behind rising poverty. Most charities involved in combatting child poverty say that more than four million children now live below the breadline, 600,000 more than in 2011/12, and that number will climb past five million as a result of cuts and the economic impact of Covid in the next few years.

I fear the economic scarring left by the pandemic and lockdowns will further turbo-charge the reversal of the gains made between 1999 and 2010, while we can currently only guess the long-term effects on children's education and wellbeing.

The situation is in some ways even more complex now than it was in 1999. I know from my time in government that the levers to address child poverty are varied and cut across policy areas and government departments.

In addition to changes to the benefit and tax credit systems, childcare, parental leave and education, the legacy of Covid and its impact on child poverty will need to be assessed and measures drawn up to counter it. Furthermore, the fact that an estimated 70% of children judged to be in poverty are in working households means we must examine how work can better support families.

That is why, in addition to a renewed commitment to eradicating child poverty within a generation, we need a national plan, drawing on all relevant areas of government capability. The challenge is huge and urgent, but it is achievable, and prime ministerial ownership, backed by the right government machinery and personnel to chase progress and clear obstacles, can make the critical difference.

Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP

Chair, Work and Pensions Select Committee

In 1999, as Prime Minister, Tony Blair committed in a speech at Toynbee Hall to a twenty year project “for ours to be the first generation to end child poverty”. His Government’s approach has often been criticised, but it did substantially reduce child poverty. With the prospect now of a more consensual approach to measuring the extent of poverty, it’s time for a new child poverty target.

I was a minister in the old Department of Social Security when Tony Blair made his speech, and was appointed to the Treasury a few weeks later. Child poverty reduction was monitored closely, using the relative poverty measure. A family was deemed “poor” if its income was less than 60% of the median for a family of its size. We almost hit a 25% reduction after the first quarter of the twenty year period.

By 2010, there had been further progress. Alistair Darling, as Chancellor, increased tax credits to deliver a substantial child poverty reduction. However, against the 2020 target, progress was well short of 50%.

I took the Child Poverty Act 2010 through Parliament with all party support. It defined the 2020 goal as achieving four targets – for relative low income; combined low income and material deprivation; absolute low income; and persistent poverty. The targets were to reduce, by 2020, the proportions of children living in households:

- > in relative poverty to below 10%;
- > with both income less than 70% of the median and material deprivation, as measured by survey, to below 5%;
- > with real terms income less than 60% of the 2010 median to below 5%;
- > in persistent poverty, defined as being in relative poverty for three years, to below a threshold which wasn’t in the Act, but was left to be set later (and in fact never was).



The Act also required Government to publish a UK-wide child poverty strategy every three years. The Coalition Government's 2014-17 strategy said it was "firmly committed to the goal of ending child poverty in the UK by 2020".

The target was officially dropped, however, after the 2015 General Election. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 repealed the Child Poverty Act. There was little public criticism. Ministers said, mistakenly in my view, that the target had incentivised heavy spending to shift people from just below the relative poverty line to just above it.

Today, poverty is on the rise, especially in-work poverty. High private rents are a growing part of the problem affecting children. In the year before the pandemic, Trussell Trust foodbanks gave out a record 1.9 million food parcels.

Ideas on measuring poverty have changed substantially. A broader consensus on how to define child poverty should now be possible. The Social Metrics Commission has been led by Baroness Stroud, Iain Duncan Smith's special adviser at DWP. The Commission has been careful to develop a measure which can command cross-party support. And the success of Marcus Rashford's campaign to maintain free school meals during school holidays suggests that the political potency of the issue is as strong as ever.

Government should now draw up and commit to a new child poverty target. After the hardships of the pandemic, there is a palpable desire to "build back better" for the future. I saw as a Minister how effective the earlier target was – whatever its weaknesses – in driving work across Government, leading to the introduction of tax credits, the minimum wage and Sure Start. We need a comparable determination to focus on the child poverty problem once again.



Emma Revie

CEO, The Trussell Trust

To truly solve a problem, you must first properly define it. And the problem of child food poverty in the UK today is not down to a lack of food. It is instead that too many families do not have enough income to afford to put food on the table.

Child ‘food poverty’ is just one symptom of a wider injustice: poverty.

Because it is not only food that children and their families cannot afford. It is heating, lighting, shelter, winter clothes, toiletries. The income for a household referred to Trussell Trust food banks is on average £77 a week after housing costs. Ninety-four per cent of those households meet the official Joseph Rowntree Foundation definition of ‘destitution’.

As things stand, every day in food banks up and down the UK, we address child food poverty with emergency food parcels. On a scale that has been growing alarmingly – and not just during the coronavirus crisis. In 2019/20 1.9 million food parcels were distributed by Trussell Trust food banks alone.

Through generous public donations of food and through a largely volunteer workforce we help these families put food on the table for a few days. But we can’t pay for the gas to cook the food, or cover the rent and stop the eviction notice being posted through the door.

Nor can food banks give these families the dignity of being able to choose and buy their own food.

Our research identifies three main drivers of need for food banks: inadequate or reduced benefits; a challenging life experience (such as illness or job loss); and a lack of informal support. These are the issues we must address if we are to tackle the poverty that underpins ‘child food poverty’.

Though it is true that the coronavirus crisis has hit families with children particularly hard, in our response to this crisis a fragile new consensus has emerged in the UK that we must seize upon.

Through measures such as the Job Retention Scheme, the temporary uplift to Universal Credit and much more, Government has taken unprecedented action to protect incomes and help people make ends meet. For the first time in far too long, the impasse of party politics was put aside. We need more leadership and clarity of purpose like this across and within political parties.

And in communities up and down the UK, as evidenced by the groundswell of support for the NHS, or for #ENDCHILDFOODPOVERTY led by Marcus Rashford, it is clear just how much we, the general public, want to protect one another from harm.

With this new consensus we must invest permanently in our social security system. Whether delivered through Universal Credit, local welfare or any other method, our benefits system must ensure we are all afforded the dignity of being able to afford the essentials if life doesn’t go to plan – be that through illness, family breakdown or indeed global pandemic making it harder or impossible to earn money through work. This is not a job for the state alone. Business, charity and wider civil society will all have their parts to play. We need to work together strategically, towards better job security for all, with work that pays enough to keep people out of poverty all together. We must understand how communities can offer informal support to prevent people from falling into poverty in the first place and crucially we must listen to and involve those most affected.

But it is our Government and our elected officials that must lead by example.



Robert Halfon MP

Chair, Education Select Committee

The events over the last year have not only had a deep and disastrous effect on the lives of disadvantaged young people but have also thrown a new light on the disturbing disparities that already existed.

We know that the loss of learning during lockdown disproportionately affects children from disadvantaged groups. The digital divide, with too many students having no access to online learning, was just one reason that, despite the huge efforts of many teachers and support staff, more than two million children did hardly any learning during the first school shutdown.

The result was not just a widening of attainment between private and state schools, but a burgeoning chasm between disadvantaged students and their better-off peers. Some figures suggest that pupils in certain year groups are now

15 to 22 months behind where they ordinarily would be.

An epidemic of educational poverty, mental health, safeguarding hazards, a digital divide and child food insecurity has also been precipitated by the pandemic. We know that the coronavirus has accelerated the gap between left-behind pupils and their better-off peers.

Some urgent first steps are needed.

1. Prioritise teachers and support staff for vaccination so that we can get schools open sooner rather than later.
2. Monitor remote provision during partial school closures, to eliminate a lottery in quality and quantity and ensure children have a level-playing field in which they can keep learning.
3. Rocket-boost catch-up funding and target it to the disadvantaged children who need it most. A review is needed of the £2.5bn pupil premium to see how it can be spent better on left-behind children.

4. Prioritise mental health with financial investment and learning from the outstanding work done by organisations like Place2Be. There should be a mental health practitioner in every school, which parents, pupils and staff should have access to - especially during Covid.
5. Build-in processes to exam assessments this year to ensure disadvantaged pupils get a fair grade, drawing on independent expertise to moderate results. Independent assessors should be used to provide a check and balance for each teacher-assessed grade.
6. We need a child food security programme. The hundreds of millions of pounds provided for free school meals is welcome. But this is a short-term solution, not a long-term one. We need to look at the root causes of child food hunger and address them through early intervention and family hubs, as well as building on the £220m Holiday Activities and Food programme announced by the Government.

Covid-19 has exposed inequalities that were already lurking in the system. There will need to be a long-term plan and an educational route map out of this pandemic, focused on addressing attainment and ensuring that those left-behind pupils aren't mired in a coronavirus swamp, even when the virus has long passed.

Without a coordinated approach to tackle educational disadvantages, the left-behind will be prevented from climbing the education ladder of opportunity. That is why the unerring focus of the House of Commons Education Committee will be to have a relentless focus on addressing social injustice in education, on standards, on skills and support for the profession.

Edward Davies

Director of Policy, Centre for Social Justice

One of the small mercies of the Covid-19 pandemic has been how little it has affected children. But our national response has closed the schools, services, and relationships on which they often rely. Vulnerability has been compounded, the poor hardest hit, and new problems have emerged.

In the months ahead, to name but a few problems, the government will have to address the collapse in the apprenticeship system (with starts down 46%), the re-emergence of previously managed addictions (relapse at almost 40%), and a school attainment gap getting wider by the day.

In the first instance they must urgently get Britain working again. Almost a third of working adults relied on the furlough scheme over the last year and millions more on Universal Credit. There are few things more damaging to a child's future, and more likely to induce poverty, than a workless household.

And for those who cannot find work, we need to ensure that not only is the welfare system supportive enough but contains the human element that so many people will need in the months ahead.

But there are also important learnings to take from the last year.

It has been tough, but we mustn't think we are unique. Economies have plunged and unemployment rates have risen before. They were higher in 2008, higher still in the mid-1990s and again in the mid-80s. Disruptions to the economic cycle like this are not new and we need not be surprised when they happen, but instead think about how we better weather them.

We need to build resilience before the next one, whatever the cause may be. And fortunately, we know that some children have fared well in the last year and we can learn from them.



Ofsted's recent report on children's experience of lockdown, based on 900 school visits, found divided experiences. The worst hit had regressed considerably while for some the extra time at home with families had been very beneficial.

It found that the home environment has been the key factor: "Children's experiences weren't necessarily determined by privilege or deprivation. Rather, those who are coping well have good support structures around them and have benefited from quality time spent with families and carers. This includes children from all backgrounds."

In short, while the two often go hand in hand, it was a family's stability that mattered more than its income. Other research corroborates this. Evidence from US and UK found teenagers' anxiety actually reduced during lockdown as they spent more time with families . Stable families with married parents were far more likely to say lockdown had been positive, regardless of income, than cohabiting or single parent families .

We currently spend £1 on reducing family conflict for every £76 we are spending on Covid catch up support for schools. But if we want to weather the next storm better, we will not find the answer in public services - we will find it by strengthening our home relationships.

It means engaging fathers from day 1, transforming birth registration, rolling out family hubs, parenting support, and relationship counselling. But first and foremost it means talking about it: parents matter, their relationships matter, marriages matter. If we are to give children the resilience they need, they matter more than anything.



David Burrowes

Executive Director of Strengthening Families

As vulnerable children and their families struggle with isolation, conflict and poverty, we need community infrastructure so that there is no wrong door for them to access the family support they need.

The Early Intervention Foundation's (EIF) new report, Planning early childhood services in 2020, states that 'it is difficult to think of a more effective way in which the government might realise its vision to "level up" Britain and ensure equality of opportunity than through ensuring access to high-quality local family services which start in maternity and run throughout childhood.' It goes on to say that "there is a logical case for more holistic and joined-up approaches to delivering area-based family services, which responds to concerns about a lack of service integration and artificial service boundaries". Putting it bluntly - Family Hubs time has come.

Family Hubs are centres which ensure families with children and young people aged 0-19 receive early help to overcome a range of difficulties and build stronger relationships.

Recently the calls for progress in supporting family hubs have grown louder. The Children's Commissioner wrote in July that "Some parents may want help to find work, or deal with the new strains on their relationship, or on their mental health, that can come with having a baby – and those stressful issues may also be making it harder for them to give their young children the loving attention they need. The Hubs would also have these more targeted services – including perinatal and infant mental health teams, JobCentre advisors, Speech and Language Therapists and housing teams – co-located within the service."

Family law practitioners have also got on this case as they see far too many (40%) separating couples use fractious courts to determine child contact and residency. Last month the Family Solutions Group concluded that "crucially the Family Hub could provide the signposting and gateway to the range of other

direct support services to children which are so sadly lacking at present.

The Government thankfully is on the same page with its manifesto commitment to “champion Family Hubs to serve vulnerable families with the intensive, integrated support they need to care for children – from the early years and throughout their lives.”

The Family Hubs Network is driving a family hubs movement characterised by:

- > A relational approach adopted by everyone who works in the Hub
- > An understanding of the importance of Early Help and prevention
- > A whole-family approach which focuses on disadvantaged and vulnerable children
- > Families have somewhere they know they can go if they need information, advice or guidance for family and relationship issues
- > Parents can get help for difficulties in their relationships with each other and not just with their children
- > Integrated health and public health priorities, such as health visiting and maternity, with social services and Troubled Families programmes.

This month the DfE is taking the first steps in establishing a national centre for family hubs which will not only develop the evidence base but share good practice. There is no time to lose.



Steve Chalke MBE

Founder and Leader, Oasis Charitable Trust

We are all in the same Covid storm, but it is clear we're in very different boats! It's a point that is often made. This strange virus is fundamentally unequal in its impact. It has exposed and exaggerated deep inequalities in our society. But our opportunity is not simply to analyse the impact of the wind – we've long known that if you grow up in poverty you'll have fewer opportunities to live a healthy, prosperous life. The pandemic gives us the chance to re-evaluate, to search for deeper answers and to change the weather!

As the cost of the 'let's get back to where we were' interventions grows, so too does the imperative for developing a clear strategy around building a different future; a 'reset' that offers a greater degree of equality to all, rather than a simple 'reopen'.

Over the last 35 years the Oasis Trust, of which I am the founder, has developed work in more than 40 disadvantaged local communities around England as well as others in countries around the world. Across that time we have specialised in building, and helping others build, strong inclusive neighbourhoods where everyone is given the opportunity to flourish and achieve their potential.

So, aside from primary and secondary schools, alternative education and supported housing, we have also developed a wide variety of other community building projects and initiatives; everything from foodbanks to debt advice centres, savings clubs to credit unions, city farms to community shops, breakfast clubs to adult literacy courses, children's centres to refugee housing, libraries to football teams and health projects to employment initiatives. We call this approach a community hub.

Why does Oasis develop hubs

Because an integrated and holistic approach to the needs of families:

- > Produces better health, wellbeing, relational and employment outcomes
- > Creates a one-stop shop approach to the delivery of family services
- > Builds and empowers local communities
- > Deploys human and financial resources at a local level more effectively

Successful hubs achieve two goals:

- > Joined up delivery of a range of different services to families
- > Joined up teams around families.

What follows are some of the weather changing ‘hub’ principles that we build into our work, and which we would recommend are essential to any successful ‘build back better’ local community and family policy:

Service delivery is not the same as Community development

Our work is based on the principle of community development rather than of service delivery. The two are very different. Service delivery has a narrow lens. It puts money into ‘quick results’ and specific initiatives. It is blinkered to the wider needs of the community, and so tends to deal with the symptoms rather than exploring the causes of poverty and disadvantage. Community development requires a longer-term approach with a wider lens.

More than this, because service delivery tends to over focus on the presenting needs of today, it is less likely to make the necessary investments to reduce risk tomorrow. It is mesmerised by the storm, rather than seeking to change the wind.

Do things ‘with’ people; not ‘to’ them or ‘for’ them

Our goal is to work with the power of community, instead of inadvertently ignoring, overriding or replacing it. It is our job to spot the existing informal, as well as formal networks, skills and strengths in a community, and to partner with them – turning recipients into providers. That means actively engaging community members and grassroots groups in designing, delivering and leading services. Our experience is that the over-professionalisation of support can corrode community engagement and ownership, rather than enhance it; often disempowering and robbing families of a sense of honour and dignity, instead of deepening and strengthening local ownership.

Co-location is not holistic integration

We seek to work in an integrated and holistic way, because we have learnt that separate, non-integrated ‘solutions’ often fail to achieve lasting change. For instance, we might be able to support a young person in school, provide youth work interventions at evenings and weekends, support their wider family through our debt advice centre and their siblings as part of our employability programmes. This ‘joined

'up' approach, focused around every child in the context of their whole lives, their whole family and their whole community, produces significant added value, beyond that of any of the individual elements of our work, because the different parts of the story add up to the whole.

Our work involves us in myriad local partnerships – with statutory agencies, businesses, community groups and other charities – but co-operation and even co-location can easily mask poor integration.

Hyper-local delivery, national coordination

Context is everything. One size never fits all. In each community we work in, our approach – although based on the same principles – is bespoke; tailored to each hyperlocal neighbourhood (often equivalent to a Local Authority ward) .

Be incarnational - lead from within

Although we employ many staff, our goal is to ensure that a number of key 'hub' staff live in and are part of the community. The 'come and go' of professionals in smart cars and smart clothes is not only dizzying to local communities, it cannot build trust or true partnership. Equally important is longevity; it takes time – more time than a parliamentary cycle – for relationships to deepen, perspective to settle, and sustainable work to take root and develop.



Charlotte Ramsden
ADCS Vice President 2020/21

The harsh reality of child and family poverty has always had a devastating impact on the wellbeing and life chances of many children in this country. The recent pandemic has turned what was already a crisis into a tsunami of need. In the words of the 2020 ADCS discussion paper, Building a country that works for all children post Covid-19, the pandemic “exposed and heightened the impact of the stark disparities between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers.” Those who were already financially challenged and persistently disadvantaged have become more so, while many new families have been tipped into poverty for the first time due to job losses or reduced income. Food insecurity, unemployment, low wages, poor housing, no money for essentials such as shoes, coats and furniture, and insufficient money for essential bills. These challenges were already the norm for over four million children before the pandemic hit and these numbers have increased. We only need to look at the sharp upturn in free school meal applications to see the impact, and with a very uncertain economic future ahead of us, it’s clear that the full effect of the pandemic is yet to be realised. Inequality has deepened, with differential impact in our diverse communities and areas where poverty was already rife. Those where poverty was already the norm have lives that are now even harder, and those who are facing challenges for the first time are going through the shock of the disruption this is having on their lives.

Local councils are playing a central part in an urgent response to child poverty, delivering crisis support and working with partner organisations, the voluntary sector and communities to offer food banks, food clubs, welfare rights and debt advice, mechanisms for crisis short term financial help, and housing support. Children’s services are using their early help systems to reach out to families and offer support and a sense of hope, helping floundering relationships, offering virtual and face to face activities, offering advice and encouraging community resilience. They are also tackling the impact of family distress and isolation; where online predators are taking advantage of children spending more time online, where domestic abuse has increased, mental health deteriorated, family functioning has broken down and children need safeguarding. Our schools are brilliant partners and since the full return of students in September, they have focused on the restoration of education and learning while continuing

to act as a universal front door from which early distress can be identified and children's needs met. Our team around the school approaches are offering support to whole families as well as providing children with the space to learn and reconnect with each other.

The challenge for local councils and for children's services is the deluge of need which outstrips available resources. In addition to rebuilding the economy, providing jobs and increasing welfare funding, there remains an urgent need to invest in the recovery of families. A long term sustainable financial settlement for local government, for children's services and for schools remains urgently needed to expand the prevention and early help support systems that we know make a difference. These services address short term need but also offer future opportunity from early years to adulthood, making real progress on the levelling up agenda to which the government has committed. Our children only have one childhood and their needs can't wait.

A close-up portrait of Helen Barnard, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a red cardigan over a white top. She is smiling and looking directly at the camera.

Helen Barnard

Director, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Work should free more families from poverty: here's how we achieve it

One of our great national successes over the last couple of decades has been the sustained rise in employment among parents, especially lone parents and mothers in couples. But rising employment has been overtaken by rising in-work poverty. Work should free families from poverty, but the majority of children in poverty now live in working families.

Five factors lock families in poverty, holding them back despite all their efforts to break free: low paid, insecure jobs; lack of suitable childcare; badly designed transport systems; weakened social security; and high housing costs. All these constraints can be removed, but it requires a coherent strategy across all parts of government as well as business and communities.

Employment was at an all time high before the pandemic struck, but four million workers were locked in poverty, with the risk of poverty having risen, especially for working parents. Parents, especially mothers, often need to work part-time or flexibly to manage childcare alongside paid work. This restricts them to lower paid jobs, often in sectors such as retail and care, where there are high levels of poverty, insecurity and less chance of training or progression to better paid work. They also face growing difficulty finding enough hours or secure and predictable work patterns.

Solving this requires several steps:

- > Grow the number of employers offering good jobs, through voluntary schemes such as the Living Wage and new Living Hours standard; social value procurement; and more effective employment right
- > Boost weak local economies to bring more good jobs to the places they're most needed
- > Provide tailored employment support to help parents to train, find and sustain better quality jobs which can be combined with caring.

A lack of affordable, flexible childcare and the cost and availability of transport also restrict the hours parents can work and the jobs they can access, especially for those working non-standard hours. Local areas need the powers and impetus to design coherent transport systems, connecting where people live with where the jobs are. Childcare system need to deliver quality, flexibility and affordability, especially to those on low incomes.

Finally, we need a strong social security system and a housing market that meets the needs of low-income families. In recent years, cuts to benefits have more than outweighed the benefits of a higher National Living Wage for many families. A lack of social rented homes crowds families into the private rented sector, where high rents, poor quality and insecurity drive people into hardship and debt and disrupt the stability of family life.

Every one of these problems can be solved. As we emerge from the pandemic and rebuild our economy, we can redesign the systems which prevent work freeing families from poverty.



Hannah Slaughter

Economist, Resolution Foundation

How should policy support family incomes in the coronavirus crisis?

The coronavirus crisis has had a big impact on family finances. More than a quarter of adults saw their incomes fall during the initial lockdown period, and 23 per cent of adults still had lower income as the economy reopened (June–September) than before the crisis.¹² And the longer-term impact of the pandemic, combined with the fact that incomes have stagnated since the

financial crisis, means we are on course for household incomes, which increased by 40 per cent in the 15 years prior to 2008, to grow by just a quarter of that (10 per cent) in the 15 years since.¹³ While bold policy action has helped to prevent a living standards disaster, the Government will need to continue to act to prevent a rise in poverty as the economy recovers.

The social security system – primarily Universal Credit (UC) – provides a vital safety net. Early in the pandemic, the Chancellor took the welcome step of raising the basic rate of UC by £20 a year, reversing cuts that had taken UC to its lowest level (in real terms) since the early 1990s.¹⁴ But the Chancellor only intended the rise to last until April 2021 – and despite the ongoing pandemic, Government policy is still to go ahead with the cut at exactly the point when unemployment is expected to spike. This will impact 6 million of the lowest-income households – containing 12 million adults and 6 million children – with the poorest quarter of households set to lose 5 per cent of their disposable incomes.¹⁵ Reversing planned cuts (and extending the previous uplift to legacy benefits) is an essential step to support families hit by the crisis.¹⁶

In the longer term, however, a return to economic growth will be needed to deliver rising living standards. The short-term focus is (rightly) on protecting public health, with the Government keeping large parts of the economy shut down to slow the spread of the virus. But once it is safe to do so, policy makers' focus must turn to stimulating the economy. This should include supporting job creation – for example, through

¹² K Handscomb & L Judge, Caught in a (Covid) trap: Incomes, savings and spending through the coronavirus crisis, Resolution Foundation, November 2020.

¹³ T Bell et al., Here today, gone tomorrow: Putting Spending Review 2020 into context, Resolution Foundation, November 2020.

¹⁴ M Brewer & L Gardiner, Key take-aways from the Chancellor's package of measures to support workers in the coronavirus crisis, Resolution Foundation, March 2020.

¹⁵ T Bell et al., Here today, gone tomorrow: Putting Spending Review 2020 into context, Resolution Foundation, November 2020.

¹⁶ T Bell, A Corlett & K Handscomb, Death by £1,000 cuts? The history, economics and politics of cutting benefits for millions of households next April, Resolution Foundation, October 2020.

incentivising hiring by raising the National Insurance contribution threshold and investing in the social care workforce – and an increase in public investment, targeted at projects such as green infrastructure that would also tackle long-term policy challenges.¹⁷

But while economic recovery is necessary to protect family incomes, getting into work doesn't always protect people from hardship. Even at record employment levels, work did not guarantee sufficient pay or hours to lift families out of poverty: in 2018, seven-in-ten adults in poverty were either working themselves or living with someone else in employment.¹⁸ Policy makers must put job quality at the heart of the recovery. Alongside better pay (continuing to increase the National Living Wage, for example), low earners deserve better working conditions and more financial security. More control over working hours – including a right to a contract that reflects the hours they work, advance notice of work schedules, and compensation where shifts are cancelled without reasonable notice – would be a good place to start.

¹⁷ L Gardiner et al., *Easing does it: Economic policy beyond the lockdown*, Resolution Foundation, July 2020.

¹⁸ L Judge & H Slaughter, *Working hard(ship): An exploration of poverty, work and tenure*, Resolution Foundation, February 2020.



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