

Consultation Response



Taking Forward the Government Economic Strategy: A discussion paper on tackling poverty, inequality, and deprivation in Scotland.

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation on *Taking Forward the Government Economic Strategy: A discussion paper on tackling poverty, inequality, and deprivation in Scotland*.

Children in Scotland welcomes and supports the general direction of the *Government Economic Strategy* with its focus on social equity, a fairer society and reducing inequality. We particularly welcome the statement that it is '*morally unacceptable that 20% of our children still live in poverty*'.

Poverty is a difficult and often miserable experience for all age groups, but it can be particularly damaging to children and young people. In addition to material restrictions, 'poverty' has social, emotional and health repercussions that act as (and create) barriers to life-long opportunity and self-improvement. Barriers created by the complex and interconnected problems of poverty, social exclusion and health inequalities cannot be adequately addressed solely by slight and relative increases in income.

There are two basic points that Children in Scotland thinks should be central to governmental policy and action. First, while income equality across the whole of society is not a realistic goal, **it is reasonable for governments to ensure that every child will grow up in a home with sufficient economic resources to support a decent, reasonable, healthy standard of living**. Second, while the measures necessary to ensure adequate standard of living are in process, **there are tangible, immediate actions that the Scottish Government should take to alleviate the worst consequences of child poverty**. These actions are described below, but range from eliminating fuel poverty for families having young or medically-vulnerable children to increasing the pre-conception and ante-natal health of teen mothers (and pregnant women living in poverty).

Scotland has an essential role in influencing the UK Government in relation to poverty and the associated issues. Children in Scotland welcomes the focus in this *Strategy* on cross governmental cooperation.

SPECIFIC POINTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Priority areas

Some children are more likely than others to experience the various negative consequences of poverty. Looked After Children; young people who are not in education, employment or training; children and young people affected by domestic abuse and/or substance misuse; teen parents; young refugees and new immigrants; young carers; children who are homeless or have runaway; and, children affected by disability should be given priority within Government policies intended to reduce and redress the harm caused by poverty.

Society's general assumption (reflected in this *Strategy*) is that the economic security and well-being of children is first, and foremost, the responsibility of parents. **The responsibility to meet at least the economic and material needs of children without parents (or whose birth parents are incapable of meeting these needs) is a moral and social imperative that must be at the heart of the Scottish Government's *Economic Strategy*.**

Previous governments in Scotland and across the UK do not have a good track as 'corporate parents'. Major improvements in the performance of the Scottish Government and local authorities as corporate parents must be a priority. This includes not only dramatically bettering the life circumstances and family support for officially 'looked after' children', but also for the far higher number of children being cared for/parented on a daily basis by grandparents and other kin/friends.

Children in Scotland also highlights the issue of teen parents within the poverty debate. **Teen parents, and particularly lone teen mothers, are an overlooked element of most government strategies, including the proposed *Economic Strategy*.** The issues of teen pregnancy and teen parenting are most often linked to sexual health policies/agencies. However, teen parenting often is a product of, and contributes to, poverty. Teenagers of all economic backgrounds get pregnant; yet, teen parents are concentrated in the lowest economic quintile. The effects of poverty influence the choices of pregnant teenagers (many of whom will themselves come from the various categories of 'vulnerable') in relation to health, education and a wide range of other areas.

The Government should better understand the choices these young parents make, as they can (and, too often, do) negatively affect the lives and life chances of these young parents and their children. They usually lack adequate financial resources to raise their children in a safe, healthy and nurturing manner. But, equally relevant is the extent to which poor teen parents also exhibit a poverty of ambition, achievement and self-worth/self-confidence. These non-financial liabilities are key factors in on-going parental poverty and childhood deprivation.

Teen parents, particularly mothers, are likely to have a limited education. This, in turn, tends to negatively effect the educational development of their children. There are two basic remedies. One is to actively discourage teen pregnancy. The

other is for national and local government to far more robustly support teen parents , so that they – and their children -- have a realistic chance of breaking the cycle of poverty.

Teen fathers are an important (but often overlooked) factor in child poverty. Teen fathers generally are presumed not to be willing/able to take responsibility for their child by both society and government. Sometimes this is accurate, but sometimes it is a self-fulfilling negative prophecy that leads to the unthinking exclusion of young fathers from involvement with the teen mother and child. One reason for this situation is that teen fathers traditionally are 'blamed' for the pregnancy and usually are unable to fulfil the stereotypic role of the father as the breadwinner.

If national and local governments recognise the important influence (positive or negative) of fathers on child well-being – and want to promote more positive lives and life chances for child born into poverty – then higher expectations and greater support of teen fathers must be reflected in public policies/strategies. Paying positive attention to teen fathers (instead of simply writing them off as hopeless cases) also would be in keeping with the new UK-wide Gender Equality Duty. ¹ Of course, it should be recognised that an actively involved, positive father is also more likely to voluntarily provide economic and non-economic (e.g., time and energy) support to mother and child -- and more likely to remain a constant support to the child, regardless of the relationship with the mother.

Gender inequality

Children in Scotland welcome the focus on a gendered analysis of poverty and a gendered approach to the solutions to poverty. However, a 'gendered' analysis can sometimes be taken to mean solely a feminist analysis. While valuable, this would miss the interplay of male and female issues that affect poverty and particularly, the poverty of children.

Children in Scotland – with funding from the Scottish Government's Equality Unit – runs a national project on Fatherhood and the Gender Equality Duty. It starts from the understanding that fathers (biological or *de facto*) are vitally important to children and to child well-being (by their absence or by their presence). This influence can be anywhere on the spectrum from highly beneficial to very harmful. The research also is clear that the positive involvement of fathers increases access to services, increases healthy 'rough and tumble' activities with children, increases educational attainment where the mother is uneducated and provides support and balance in the home in relation to discipline. Even when the relationship with the mother breaks down, children still need, and will benefit from, the active engagement of their fathers. Those children with at least one positive father figure are significantly more likely to have a better social and emotional foundation from which to grow.

¹ *Making the Gender Equality Duty Real for children, young people and their fathers*, Children in Scotland, 2007

Fathers who are involved in the primary care of their children from birth are more likely to continue that involvement throughout the child's life. Easing and sharing the childcare responsibilities in the home gives fathers a work/life balance, and creates the opportunity for a better work/life balance for the mother – both of which ultimately benefit the child. The experience of men as caregivers addresses social gender stereotyping and sets a positive example for children. However, it should also be recognised that issues such as equal pay and the burden of caring responsibilities are unlikely to progress and improve significantly without the active involvement of men in the home.

Childcare costs are the responsibility of both parents – and, therefore, a matter that should be of importance to all employers. Increasing the expectation on employers to contribute to society (through the well-being and care of their employee's children is essential to improving access to work for both parents. Employers also need to address the gendered expectations surrounding their flexible working opportunities. Children in Scotland urges the Scottish Government and COSLA to encourage and support the UK government to implement proposals for shared maternity and paternity leave, with employment security for fathers included. For public bodies, this should be viewed as part of implementing the Gender Equality Duty.

Early Years, Early Intervention and Prevention

The importance of getting the early years right for all children has been recognised and promoted by the Scottish Government. Constructing the foundations for the social, emotional, physical and educational development of all children occur at a very rapid pace from the ante-natal period through the first three years of life.

Research in a variety of fields internationally is clear on two points: 1) harm done, and developmental opportunities missed, during these early years are difficult and expensive to compensate for later (when possible at all); and, 2) children born into poverty are far more likely to experience harm and missed developmental opportunities than those born into wealthier families. To date, children born into (or spending their early years in) poverty have been most in need of extra help and most likely to benefit from it – but least likely actually to receive such help. From health inequalities at birth to the lower quality, accessibility and affordability of early years services and education, young children in poor families are not growing up on a level playing field.

There has been an inability (or unwillingness) to ensure that another generation of young children will not be behind before they even begin. That must end now. Children in Scotland strongly supports the Scottish Government's repeated call for 'transformational' change in the early years arena – and its focus on prevention and early intervention. These good intentions must be backed up by equally good implementation in order for the hoped-for good results to be more

than wishful thinking. Transformational change is unlikely to occur without major investments.

Breaking the cycle of poverty has to begin at the pre-conception and antenatal periods (e.g., by reducing the number of children whose entire lives are compromised by alcohol, drug and tobacco use during pregnancy). Good birth outcomes should be followed up with positive support for parents (rather than 'parent education' being used and seen as a punishment). The option of first-rate, affordable, accessible childcare for children over two years old should be a normal part of early years provision across Scotland.

However, this is not a case for supporting targeted provision in the poorest areas. **We believe that universal services from pre-conception through pre-school are what will be of the most benefit to society as whole and to families mired in poverty most of all.** Encouraging children from all backgrounds to mix and develop together should be understood to be good policy, good politics and good practice. Creating service 'ghettos' for poverty families has never proven effective at much more than stigmatising its ostensible beneficiaries. Providing additional assistance as, where, to whom and when needed (and wanted) will augment universal services and support in ways that benefit all concerned.

The Government must also address the dual issue of a gender stereotyped, low skilled and low paid early years workforce. The quality of the childcare/pre-school health and education workforce is at the heart of the quality of services offered to children and their families. Low pay of those working with young and vulnerable children not only affects the quality of the services but also means that those working in this sector are more vulnerable to poverty than those working in many other parts of the workforce. Upgrading these jobs can directly impact on levels of poverty amongst those families and in those communities most at risk. More highly trained staff is a must for pre school sectors particularly where training covers the needs of the whole child. For example the Scottish pedagogue model has a role to play in identifying and meeting the needs of children who require additional support. There are solutions available to the plethora of workforce issues that affect the early years that we can commend to the Scottish Government, COSLA and private sector employers.²

Finally, children in Scotland would note that the low paid nature of this work reflects and reinforces the gendered nature of this workforce. For most children of single parent families, it can also reinforce gendered roles as these children can reach primary school (and even secondary school) before they encounter a positive male influence in their lives.

² *Working it out: developing the children's sector workforce*, Children in Scotland 2008

Environmental health inequalities

Children and young people living in poverty are at risk from a number of environmental health hazards that other children in Scotland do not experience. For example, fuel poverty means that infants and other vulnerable children and young people are living in cold, damp homes. This poverty-caused unhealthy environment unsurprisingly leads to a disproportionately high level of asthma/allergic conditions, respiratory illnesses and skin problems in children.

Another environmental health risk disproportionately borne by children in poverty involves exposure to unhealthy levels of lead from old paint and water supplies (e.g., the continuing existence of lead pipes or lead soldering somewhere in their drinking water sources). Some children in deprived urban and rural areas are living in older, dilapidated housing that is more likely to present lead exposure problems. To the best of our knowledge, the Scottish Government has not yet confirmed its commitment to the European/UK CEHAPE recommendation to: reducing the maximum level of lead in drinking water (from 25 to 10 units); engaging in more rigorous monitoring of lead in drinking water; or, taking action to eliminate the sources of lead exposure to children (once identified). Children in Scotland recommends priority attention to this issue..

Attention also must be given to water quality, sanitation, and hygiene in the diverse early years settings in which ever-increasing numbers of young children are placed (as well as in schools). Given the mixed economy of early years care and provision, Government must take full account of where young children actually are day-to-day (e.g., with childminders, at private centres, with grandparents or in other locations outside their homes) and propose actions that will reach young children in these disparate and often unregulated environments. It is reasonable to suspect that children in deprived communities – and from poor families – are more likely to end up in less healthy early years settings.

The WHO CEHAPE environmental health standards cover foetuses, as well as children already born. For these children, their pregnant mother's body is their entire environment. Pregnant women living in poverty experience a range of health problems and health inequalities that can (and often do) adversely affect their unborn children. Thus, even before drawing their first breath, poor children are more likely to suffer life-long, irreversible damage from exposure to alcohol (i.e., Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and FASD), drugs, tobacco and poor nutrition.³

It also is the case that poor children are more likely to suffer injuries, including serious, life-altering and fatal injuries. In part, this is attributable to inadequate and poorly maintained housing located in neighbourhoods/communities that are relatively unsafe. For instance, **children living in the most deprived quintile of Scottish communities are three times more likely to be killed in road accidents than children living in the least deprived.**⁴ The time is long past for this poverty 'death penalty' to be abolished.

³ <http://www.hpa.org.uk/web/HPAweb&HPAwebStandard/Page/1204707136075>

⁴ *Scotland's Child Safety Strategy*, ROSPA et al 2008

Income poverty

Income poverty in one of the richest countries in the world needs to be resolved. The Scottish Government should engage positively with the UK Government to promote the best interests of Scotland's children in terms of taxation and family benefits. Children in Scotland welcomes the recognition given to intergovernmental working in the *Economic Strategy*. However, while taxation and benefits are reserved matters, the Scottish Government has the power to act independently of the UK to provide various kinds of immediate support to vulnerable children and their families -- for example, through the school uniform allowance and free school meals. These policies have a dual role; they alleviate the income poverty in families by freeing-up some family cash; and, they directly provide children with essential items and services that contribute to child well-being.

However, the Scottish Government could and should do more. For example, it should take the steps necessary to eliminate fuel poverty in homes where infants, young children and medically-vulnerable young people reside. Doing so would mean that children no longer would be forced to grow up in cold and damp homes, prone to illness, chronic conditions (such as asthma) and the ill-effects of this environmental health problem. Without such action, the Government is failing all children as fuel prices increase -- particularly young children, children in large families and children affected by disability (who have higher than average fuel consumption needs).

How should the Scottish Government best go about engaging with the wider public in its efforts to tackle poverty in Scotland?

The Scottish Government cannot fully comprehend the meaning and impact of poverty on children and young people without engaging *directly and meaningfully* with them. Hearing and heeding the views of children and young people on issues that impact upon their lives is a duty under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It also makes sense. Children and young people's perspective on poverty and well-being, their changing perceptions of self worth; understanding what they value and the extent of their personal ambition all will result in more appropriate and thorough policy development to make real and lasting improvements to the quality of their lives.

Children in Scotland is Scotland's national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies, services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents over 450 members, including all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar

agencies in other parts of the UK and the European Union.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Executive, local authorities and practitioners. It services a number of groups such as: the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People; the National Children's Voluntary Forum; the National Early Years Forum, the Rural Advisory Group and the Additional Support Needs Network. Children in Scotland hosts Enquire, the national advice service for additional support for learning.

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