



Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK

Policy Response Series No.4

**Consultation Response; Northern
Ireland Draft Child Poverty Strategy**

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Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK

Overview

The Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK Project is funded by the Economic, Science and Research Council (ESRC). The Project is a collaboration between the University of Bristol, University of Glasgow, Heriot Watt University, Open University, Queen's University (Belfast), University of York, the National Centre for Social Research and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The project commenced in April 2010 and will run for three-and-a-half years.

The primary purpose is to advance the 'state of the art' of the theory and practice of poverty and social exclusion measurement. In order to improve current measurement methodologies, the research will develop and repeat the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey. This research will produce information of immediate and direct interest to policy makers, academics and the general public. It will provide a rigorous and detailed independent assessment on progress towards the UK Government's target of eradicating child poverty.

Objectives

This research has three main objectives:

- To improve the measurement of poverty, deprivation, social exclusion and standard of living
- To assess changes in poverty and social exclusion in the UK
- To conduct policy-relevant analyses of poverty and social exclusion

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The Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) team at Queen's University, which oversees the application and analysis of the UK-wide 2011 poverty and social exclusion survey in Northern Ireland¹, welcomes the initiative to produce a Child Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland. Among the notable features of the draft Strategy, as set out in the Consultation Document issued in December 2010, are the recognition that addressing child poverty requires a long-term approach and that child poverty is caused by a wide range of factors. The 'child's environment' is well articulated by the strategy, taking into account the 'proximate environment' of the entire family as well as the wider environment of neighbourhood, locality and community. The 'partnership approach', especially with regard to service provision, is also to be welcomed.

The team also welcomes the commitment to monitor the strategy and to set out both targets and indicators for this purpose. The evidence produced by the 2011 PSE survey should help in this respect.

The draft strategy sets out clearly that the two key strands of its approach to reducing child poverty are: reducing worklessness among adults with children and promoting long-term outcomes through child-based interventions. While the adult and child focus of these measures is to be welcomed, the particularity of the approach is notable: the focus is to be placed on particular sectors of the child population rather than adopting a more universal approach which aims to address poverty by improving the lives of all children and their families. As well as the matter of the balance to be struck between a policy that supports all children and one prioritising children in or at risk of poverty and disadvantage, the targeted approach raises complex questions. These include, for example, the degree to which children need to be targeted directly or through family support more broadly; the respective roles of general income support as against needs-oriented provision; the relative roles of cash/financial support as against services. Another important point underlying this issue is the balance between preventive and remedial actions. It is relevant to note in this regard that programmes like Sure Start were intended as preventive measures.² On our reading, the strategy is characterised by something of a disjuncture between its overarching aim – which is universalist in orientation – and its particularist or targeted approach as evidenced in the key strands. In the view of the PSE team, a universal approach is the best way of preventing child poverty (one of the strategy's underpinning principles).

The strategy evidences a narrow approach in other respects as well. The focus on worklessness is an example in point – it is now well known that a job *per se* is not the answer to family poverty. This is the case for several reasons. The existence of in-work poverty – estimated to be in the region of 8 percent in the UK - and the fact that over half of poor children have someone in employment in their household³ suggest that policy

¹ The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and is carried out in collaboration between the University of Bristol, University of Glasgow, Heriot Watt University, Queen's University, Open University, the University of York, the National Centre for Social Research and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The project commenced in April 2010 and will run for three and a half years. For further information see <http://www.poverty.ac.uk>.

² See Daly, M. (2010) 'Shifts in family policy in the UK under New Labour', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 20, 5: 433-43.

³ See: Bradshaw, J., Bennett, F. and Mayhew, E. (2010) *In-Work Poverty and Labour Market Segmentation: A study of national policies*: UK, available at: <http://php.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/1916/>.

makers need to think beyond the employment activation approach. In particular, there is the matter of sustainable and quality jobs – employment positions that pay a sufficient wage and that offer opportunities for advancement and development. In light of this, we suggest that the strategy devote greater attention to job quality and job sustainability. In addition, the ‘family friendliness’ of programmes and measures designed to get people into employment needs to be considered as does their gender and other Section 75 equality dimensions.

Another reason why a reliance on parental employment constitutes an incomplete response to child poverty is because not everyone can be in employment. There is the matter of parents caring for children for example – many families rely on one earner for this very reason. Parental care of young children is a widespread value in Northern Irish society and the strategy’s strong focus on worklessness as the problem undervalues both care and carers. Furthermore, many parents are in poverty because they are in poor health or have physical or mental disabilities; many poor people also have multiple disadvantages (from health to education to housing for example). All of this leads the PSE team to question whether the strategy devotes sufficient attention to income levels and their role in child poverty. Adequate income supports for families with children are an essential element of the architecture to reduce child poverty. While the strategy makes reference to ‘targeting financial support to be responsive to family situations’, the matter of the adequacy of benefit levels is not centrally addressed. In the opinion of the team, this constitutes a fundamental weakness of the strategy and we make the recommendation that the strategy expand its first key strand to include as an objective ‘maintaining and even increasing levels of financial and other forms of support to people and families in poverty’.

The joined up approach – as articulated in the key principle to promote excellence in support across a range of key policy areas – is welcome. However, it needs to be specified in more detail. How will it work? What does it mean in practice? How will this strategy relate to the many initiatives that already exist (as specified in section 2.4 of the consultation document)? In our view, specific mechanisms for co-ordination between different programmes for children and their families (and especially between services and income-based measures) are a priority. In addition, employers should be specifically targeted as partners and the strategy should also make clear the role envisaged for the voluntary/community sector.

It is notable also that the underlying framework separates childcare and education, mainly because in Northern Ireland these are not represented by one service as in other parts of the UK. We believe that this weakens the strategy’s approach and increases the risk of fragmentation in practice. The integration of statutory education, early years and childcare provision can provide the strategic direction required and is an area where the Executive can take action.

The strategy is especially notable for the intention to put children at the centre, allowing them the opportunity to have their voice heard when developing policies and programmes. This accords with best practice internationally although it must be said that there are major challenges for policy makers everywhere in recognising the child as a ‘stand-alone’ agent. In effect, children’s policy still tends to be subsumed under the heading of ‘family policy’ or ‘parenting policy’. Both child-specific as well as family-oriented policy are needed. In regard to child-specific approaches, a social rights approach for children is widely

endorsed (by the EU⁴, UN and the Council of Europe for example). An example of this kind of approach is Ireland's *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016*.⁵ This seeks to recognise children as holders of rights and to concretise this by giving them a series of rights and guarantees. Among the latter are: growing up in a family with access to sufficient resources, supports and services, leaving primary school literate and numerate, completing a senior educational cycle, having access to world-class health, personal social services and accommodation, as well as quality play, sport, recreation and cultural activities and appropriate participation in local and national decision making. While there are clear constraints on the Executive, the NI strategy need not be characterised by a poverty of ambition. The strategy's overarching aim is 'input focused' (providing opportunity) rather than expressing outcomes such as 'the creation of a society in which no children are disadvantaged by poverty' (as in the Scottish and Welsh strategies) or a vision of a society in which no children are poor (as in the Irish national action plan for social inclusion).

Furthermore, we wish to point out that, while the child-centred approach is stated as a principle at the outset, it tends to fade from view as the document proceeds. There is a sense in which it becomes procedural, a matter of how agencies pursue their business rather than something that requires structural initiatives, like a children's parliament or youth forum for example. The absence of any mention of a role for the Children's Ombudsman in this respect is also notable.

In addition, there is the matter of how children's needs are to be central in policy making more broadly. Some countries in Europe as well as international agencies have been following a mainstreaming children approach, whereby the needs of children and the likely impact of new measures are considered as part of the policy process across a range of policy domains.⁶ This is an approach that the strategy might consider using.

In light of the approach adopted in the strategy – which is to set out the principles and priority policy areas and actions - it would be welcome were it to make an upfront commitment to and specify the detail of a set of signature initiatives. In the document as it stands, a 'delivery plan' is left open. In the view of the PSE team, this is a risky strategy and one that may weaken the impact of the strategy. We therefore feel it would be beneficial for the strategy to list some signature initiatives from the outset. Some that suggest themselves in this context include food poverty, improving opportunities for low-income families to participate in arts, cultural, sporting and leisure activities, initiatives to ensure that that children and young people are living in homes which achieve the Decent Homes Standard. Some signature initiatives along these or other lines would, we suggest, help to give the strategy a more concrete and distinct identity and also lend it a stronger public profile, presence and support.

⁴ The EU issued a Communication in 2006 entitled: 'Towards an EU strategy on the rights of the child'. This is available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2006:0367:FIN:EN:PDF>.

⁵ Available at: <http://www.socialinclusion.ie/documents/NAPinclusionReportPDF.pdf>.

⁶ See <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/details.asp?id=2847&title=mainstreaming-childrens-rights>. See also Jones, N.A. and Sumner, A. (2011) *Child Poverty Evidence and Policy: Mainstreaming Children in International Development*, Bristol: Policy Press.