

# KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE SEMINAR SERIES



26th April 2012

## *Defining the breadline Is there a Northern Ireland consensus?*

Mike Tomlinson & Grace Kelly

### Summary

Measures of poverty typically combine low household income thresholds with indicators of 'enforced deprivation' – items and activities that people lack because they cannot afford them. Which deprivation indicators are the important ones for defining poverty is a matter of international debate. The seminar will present findings from a population-wide survey of Northern Ireland asking people's opinion about items and activities that everyone should be able to afford and not have to do without. A total of 76 items and activities were tested and the seminar will explore the degree of consensus within the population on 'the necessities of life'.

### Why 'deprivation indicators'?

In 1995 the United Nations convened a Summit for Social Development at which 117 countries (including the UK and Ireland) agreed to develop plans for the measurement and reduction of 'overall poverty' and the eradication of 'absolute poverty'. In the case of Ireland, these concepts were used to develop targets to reduce the proportion of the population living in low income households ('overall poverty') and in 'consistent poverty' (equivalent to 'absolute poverty') (1997 National Anti-Poverty Strategy). Consistent poverty involved a combination of low income and enforced deprivation – a situation in which households lack some basic essentials because they cannot afford them. Initially eight items were used and lacking any one of these items, combined with low household income, put people in the consistent poverty category. Since 2007, the consistent poverty measure is based on the lack of two of eleven deprivation items (see Table 1). The consistent poverty rate rose from 4.2% of the population in 2008 to 6.2% in 2010. The deprivation rate (the proportion of the population lacking two or more of the eleven items irrespective of income level) rose from 11.8% in 2007 to 22.5% in 2010.

Since 2009, all EU countries and the European

Table 1: Deprivation items in R. of Ireland

1. Two pairs of strong shoes
2. A warm waterproof overcoat
3. Buy new not second-hand clothes
4. Eat meals with meat, chicken, fish (or vegetarian equivalent) every second day
5. Have a roast joint or its equivalent once a week
6. Had to go without heating during the last year through lack of money
7. Keep the home adequately warm
8. Buy presents for family or friends at least once a year
9. Replace any worn out furniture
10. Have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month
11. Have a morning, afternoon or evening out in the last fortnight, for entertainment

Commission have adopted commonly agreed indicators to measure both income poverty and 'material deprivation'. The EU deprivation rate is defined as the proportion of people who lack at least three of the nine items shown in Table 2 (because they cannot afford them). All EU countries now collect survey data on household incomes and the extent to which households lack the basic items. In 2010, 13.4% of the UK population were in households lacking three or more of the EU deprivation items (10.4% in 2007). For Ireland the figure was 19.6% (up from 10.3% in 2007).

Table 2: EU Deprivation items, 2009

1. To face unexpected expenses
2. One week annual holiday away from home
3. To pay for arrears (mortgage or rent, utility bills or hire purchase instalments)
4. A meal with meat, chicken, or fish every second day
5. To keep home adequately warm
6. To have a washing machine
7. To have a colour TV
8. To have a telephone
9. To have a personal car

Household income data for N. Ireland has been collected using the Family Resources Survey since 2003. The FRS reports publish information on twelve deprivation items and Table 3 shows the proportion of persons living in households with incomes below 60% of UK median income (before housing costs are deducted) and lacking each of the items. According to Table 3, almost a fifth of people on low incomes could not afford to keep their accommodation adequately warm in 2009-10, a half cannot afford one week's holiday and over one-third are unable to replace worn out furniture or repair/replace broken electrical goods. For people of pension age on low incomes, the figures are much higher: 44% are unable to keep their home warm and over one half do not have enough money to keep the home in a decent décor, or to replace worn out furniture (2009-10).

Table 3: Percentage of all persons in households with incomes <60% UK median and lacking items

All persons, Northern Ireland	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
Enough Money to keep home in decent décor	13	13	24	18	20
Hobby or Leisure Activity	19	14	17	14	19
Holidays away from home one week a year (not staying with relatives)	50	48	50	43	49
Household Contents Insurance	25	26	25	19	23
Have friends / family round for drink/ meal at least once a month	25	23	29	24	26
Save £10+ a month	50	55	49	46	49
2 pairs of all weather shoes per adult in household	11	9	12	9	10
Replace any worn out furniture	36	36	37	33	35
Replace/repair broken electrical goods	29	29	31	29	34
Money to spend on yourself each week (not on your family)	36	38	35	34	40
Able to keep accommodation warm enough	8	15	12	13	18
Behind in one or more household bill	13	13	13	10	13

### Omnibus Survey 'Necessities of Life' module

In February 2011, the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey included a 'Necessities of Life' module which asked a representative sample of N. Ireland households what they thought about a range of material goods and social activities. The survey is part of a research project on Poverty and Social

Exclusion in the UK, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Survey participants were given a pack of 76 randomly sorted cards on which were listed items relating to the standard of living of adults and children. Participants were asked to sort these cards into two boxes. Box A was for items which participants thought were *necessary and that adults and children in N. Ireland today should not have to do without*. Box B was for items thought to be *desirable but not strictly necessary*. This paper provides some of the results from the Omnibus survey and explores the meaning of the results.<sup>1</sup>

### Selection of items

How were the 76 items selected? The starting point was a list of items used in previous surveys and commonly included in deprivation surveys across Europe. There is a built-in conservatism to this type of work as researchers always like to compare results with previous surveys. On the other hand there are at least three pressures for innovation. First, standards of living change and with that, people's expectations about the 'necessities of life' also change. In the last fifteen to twenty years, for example, there have been huge changes in the area of communications technologies and this is reflected in ownership patterns and notions of what is normal and necessary. Mobile phones and access to the internet are obvious cases in point: a relatively low proportion of N. Ireland households are connected to the internet (see Table 4). The other reason to question the traditional lists of items is that we cannot be sure that lists drawn up by experts over the years include all of the things that matter to most people or that there is a shared meaning behind a question. A third reason for innovation is to contribute to knowledge about inequality in living standards across the entire spectrum, rather than simply to be concerned with defining a break point below which there is 'poverty' and above which there is no poverty. To achieve this broader 'standard of living' index we need to be asking people, for example, about dishwashers, second homes, boats and so on.

**Table 4:** *Percentage of households with durable goods*

	North East	South East	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Car/van	68	81	74	70	77
One	43	42	43	42	44
Two	21	30	26	23	27
Three or more	4	9	5	5	6
Washing machine	96	96	96	97	97
Tumble dryer	59	59	62	59	56
Dishwasher	27	47	35	39	48
Mobile phone	80	84	48	84	49
DVD player	91	89	86	89	78
Internet connection	64	75	65	69	61

Source: *Living Costs and Food Survey 2010*

<sup>1</sup> An online version of the necessities survey is available for completion at [www.poverty.ac.uk](http://www.poverty.ac.uk).

So the list used in the Omnibus survey is a mixture of what has gone before, new items reflecting changing standards of living and additional items informed by focus group discussions carried out all over the UK. It is important that the list provides data comparable with that produced by similar work carried out ten years ago, that we are able to compare with deprivation items recorded in other countries and at EU level, and that the list reflects changing popular perceptions of living standards. The focus groups for example led us to delete some items – ‘vacuum cleaner’ and ‘dictionary’. Ten years ago, the item ‘regular savings (of at least £10 a month)’ was used. The focus groups proposed ‘£20 a month’. A number of new items were introduced following the focus group consultations: ‘all recommended dental work/treatment’, ‘hair done or cut regularly’, ‘a table with chairs at which the family can eat’ and ‘taking part in sport/exercise activities or classes’.

The focus groups also influenced the selection of children’s items for inclusion in the survey – 30 of the 76 items related to children. Two of the additions prompted by the focus groups were: ‘a suitable place at home to study or do homework’ and ‘toddler group or nursery or play group at least once a week for pre-school aged children’.

### Main ‘necessities’ results

Results were obtained from 1,276 household respondents. Of these 84% thought that a washing machine was a necessity which compares to the 97% of households in N. Ireland which actually possess a washing machine (Table 4). In contrast, nearly half of all households (48%) in N. Ireland have a dishwasher (compared to 27% in the North East of England) but only 11% of respondents to the Omnibus survey think that a dishwasher is a necessity. Table 5 gives the full results on the proportion of respondents saying that an item is a necessity and Table 6 shows the results for children’s items.

**Table 5: Proportion of respondents who think items are ‘necessary’ for adults**

Damp-free home	92	Two pairs of all-weather shoes	54
Heating to keep home adequately warm	92	To be able to pay an unexpected expense of £500	51
Two meals a day	88	Replace worn out clothes with new (not second hand) ones	51
Visiting friends or family in hospital or other institutions	86	Car	50
Washing machine	84	Replace any worn out furniture	44
Replace or repair broken electrical goods such as refrigerator or washing machine	80	A small amount of money to spend each week on yourself, not on your family	44
A warm waterproof coat	80	Friends or family round for a meal or drink at least once a month	43
Celebrations on special occasions such as Christmas	79	Presents for friends or family once a year	43
Fresh fruit and vegetables every day	78	Regular payments into an occupational or private pension	43
All recommended dental work/treatment	78	An outfit to wear for social or family occasions such as parties and weddings	41
Attending weddings, funerals and other such occasions	75	A holiday away from home for one week a year, not staying with relatives	40
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day	72		

Telephone at home (landline or mobile)	72	A roast joint (or its equivalent) once a week	40
Enough money to keep your home in a decent state of decoration	71	Mobile phone	36
Household contents insurance	70	Hair done or cut regularly	36
A table, with chairs, at which all the family can eat	68	Home computer	30
A hobby or leisure activity	67	Internet connection at home	28
Curtains or window blinds	66	Going out socially once a fortnight (evening meal)	28
Appropriate clothes to wear for job interviews	60	Visits to friends or family in other parts of the country 4 times a year	26
Regular savings (of at least £20 a month) for rainy days	57	A meal out once a month	21
Attending church, mosque, synagogue or other places or worship	56	Holidays abroad once a year	20
Television	55	Going to the cinema, theatre or music event once a month	17
Taking part in sport/exercise activities or classes	55	Going out for a drink once a fortnight	17
		Dishwasher	11

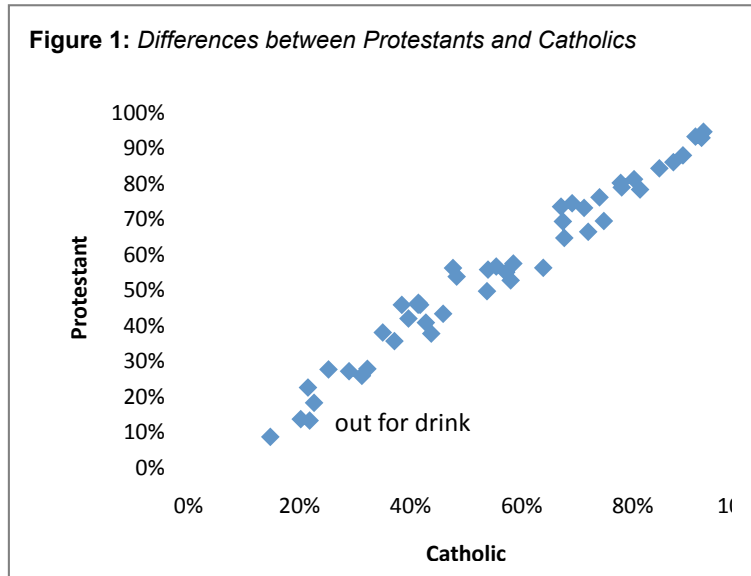
**Table 6:** Proportion of respondents who think items are 'necessary' for children

A warm winter coat	93	Computer and internet for homework	60
Three meals a day	93	Day trips with family once a month	58
New, properly fitting shoes	91	Outdoor leisure equipment such as roller-skates, skateboards, footballs etc.	55
Fresh fruit or vegetables at least once a day	91	Pocket money	54
Celebrations on special occasions such as birthdays, Christmas or other religious festivals	87	Money to save	53
A hobby or leisure activity	87	Going on a school trip at least once a term	52
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent at least once a day	87	At least 4 pairs of trousers, leggings, jeans or jogging bottoms	52
A garden or outdoor space nearby where they can play safely	87	Construction toys such as Duplo or Lego	51
Books at home suitable for their ages	84	Bicycle	47
A suitable place at home to study or do homework	81	A holiday away from home for at least one week a year	47
Toddler group or nursery or play group at least once a week for pre-school aged children	78	Friends round for tea or snack once a fortnight	44
Children's clubs or activities such as drama or football training (youth club or similar activity)	76	Clothes to fit in with friends	29
Indoor games suitable for their ages (building blocks, board games, computer games etc)	71	Mobile phone for children aged 11 or older	29
Some new, not second-hand clothes	69	MP3 player such as an iPod	10
Enough bedrooms for every child of 10 or over of a different sex to have their own bedroom	67	Designer/brand name trainers	8

### Is there a consensus on 'necessities'?

If we are to use the survey results to build a picture of what the majority of people in N. Ireland believe to be basic necessities and to build this standard into our measure of poverty and deprivation, it would be useful to establish that there is indeed a consensus on the important items. If 68% of the population say that 'A table, with chairs, at which all the family can eat' is a necessity, is this view shared by young and old alike, by people of different community backgrounds, and by men and women? The survey results allow us to test for the degree of consensus across a number of social variables.

The notable feature of Figure 1 is that there is strong agreement across community background on the proportions saying particular items are necessary. One statistically significant difference is in the proportions saying 'going out for a drink once a fortnight' is



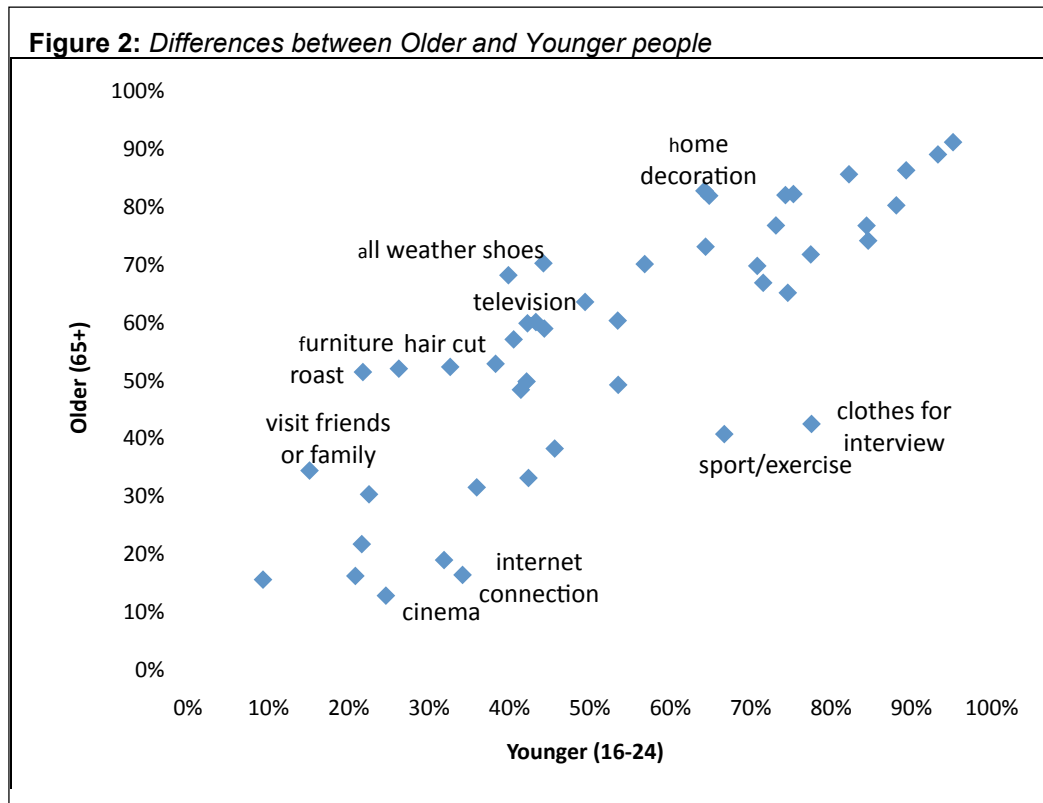
a necessity – 12% of Protestants and 22% of Catholics (significant at the 0.001 level). More Protestants (55%) than Catholics (48%) believed 'To be able to pay an unexpected expense of £500' was a necessity (significant at the .05 level).

From the 'heat' chart on page 9 it can be seen that there is a high degree of consensus between different occupational groups ('managerial and professional' compared to 'partly skilled and unskilled manual'), between those with different educational qualifications ('primary' compared to 'tertiary'), between those with and without a disability, and between those with and without dependants. The main differences in the perception of necessities that stand out for these categories is:

- the gap in scores for 'fresh fruit and vegetables every day' and 'visits to friends and family in other parts of the country four times a year' (not shown) among occupational groups;
- the gap in scores for 'television', 'enough money to keep your home in a decent state of decoration', 'appropriate clothes for job interviews' and 'regular payments into an occupational or private pension' among those with different levels of educational attainment;
- the gap in scores between the top and bottom 20% income groups (not shown in the heat chart) for 'television', 'enough money to keep your home in a decent state of decoration', and 'regular payments into an occupational or private pension', which mirror the results for occupational groups.

The variable that demonstrates the largest divergence of views on necessities is age. Younger people are much more likely than older people to say that clothes for a job interview is a necessity (36 percentage points difference). There is a 29 percentage point difference on 'a roast joint once

a week', and a 26 percentage point difference on 'a warm coat'. Older people place more value on a television while younger people are more likely to say that mobile phones and the internet are necessities.



The clear differences between older and younger people have been recognised for many years. It has long been established that pensioners respond much more conservatively than non-pensioners to surveys about living standards. They are more likely to say they are managing alright and to identify different items and activities as important for their needs. Such concerns led to a new suite of survey questions in the Family Resources Survey (from May 2008) specifically aimed at measuring the living standards of older people. There is now a discussion about how best to combine the items into a pensioners' deprivation index.

The implementation of the UK Child Poverty Act (2010) raises similar questions about how to combine low income with deprivation items. The Act specifies a number of measures and targets for reducing child poverty and one of these is that less than 5% of children should be in the 'combined low income and material deprivation' category by 2020. The proposed income measure is 70% of the median UK household income. The Field Review (*The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults*, 2011) proposed a new measure of 'severe' child poverty and this was accepted in the UK Government's *New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families' Lives* (Cm 8061, April 2011). 'Severe' poverty is defined by a lower income threshold of 50% of median income, combined with deprivation items. The latter

have not been defined as yet. The strategy also intends to monitor 'family circumstances' (proportion of children in workless households, proportion of children in families where at least one person works but is income poor, the proportion of 18-24 year olds not in education, training or employment), 'children's life chances' (low birth weight, readiness of children to learn, attainment gaps between free school meal recipients and others, progression to higher education, teenage pregnancy rates, offending among 10-17 year olds, and 'family structure' – the proportion of children living in income poor households by whether couples are married, in a civil partnership, or cohabiting, and by lone parents).

## **Conclusion**

Deprivation indicators are increasingly important in defining and measuring living standards at global, European, national and regional levels. Which indicators we choose to record and combine with measures of low income are critical to Governments' anti-poverty targets and whether the aim is to focus on the most severe end of the spectrum or a broader group in relation to the entire spectrum of living standards. Behind the technical arguments over the relative importance of indicators lies the social and political argument over the causes of poverty and the significance of growing income inequalities in the prevalence of social problems, social cohesion and overall well-being.

The approach taken in our research is to inform social policy with the evidence of what the majority of people regard as the basic necessities of life. Notwithstanding some significant differences, especially between young and old, there is a remarkable degree of consensus between social groups and categories across income, occupation, community background and gender. The results of the N. Ireland Omnibus Survey module on the necessities of life show that what most people think leads to a different set of indicators than those built in to current deprivation rates (such as the EU measure). Five of the eleven indicators used in the Irish consistent poverty measure fail to achieve a majority score in Northern Ireland (e.g. only 28% think that going out once a fortnight is a necessity). Three of the EU deprivation measures are either below the 50% threshold in N. Ireland or on the margins. We therefore propose that the FRS material deprivation items are regularly reviewed and updated to reflect the social consensus on the basic necessities of life. In the next stage of the work we will be proposing a set of deprivation indicators for children, adults and older adults to inform policy at regional, national and EU levels.



<i>Selected Items for Adults</i>	Male	Female	Younger (16-24 )	Older (65+)	Managerial and professional	Partly skilled & unskilled	Tertiary	Primary	Catholic	Protestant	Has disability	No disability	Has dependants	No dependants
Damp-free Heating	91%	93%	93%	89%	91%	92%	94%	87%	91%	93%	91%	92%	94%	90%
Washing machine	83%	85%	74%	82%	80%	84%	82%	84%	85%	84%	86%	83%	88%	81%
Replace/repair white goods	77%	83%	75%	82%	80%	77%	80%	77%	80%	81%	77%	81%	79%	81%
Warm coat	79%	80%	59%	85%	83%	77%	82%	79%	80%	81%	82%	79%	79%	80%
Fresh fruit/veg	73%	83%	73%	76%	83%	71%	85%	70%	78%	80%	75%	79%	83%	76%
Dental work	75%	81%	78%	71%	80%	76%	80%	71%	78%	78%	77%	78%	81%	76%
Telephone	73%	70%	65%	82%	72%	70%	73%	72%	71%	72%	75%	71%	71%	72%
Decent decoration	72%	71%	64%	82%	66%	75%	68%	77%	69%	74%	74%	71%	67%	75%
Table + chairs	67%	69%	71%	69%	70%	65%	72%	64%	72%	66%	67%	69%	72%	66%
Curtains/blinds	60%	70%	57%	70%	64%	68%	65%	64%	68%	64%	72%	64%	67%	65%
Clothes for job interview	59%	60%	78%	42%	59%	59%	71%	45%	64%	56%	49%	62%	61%	59%
£20 regular savings	55%	59%	53%	60%	59%	55%	63%	56%	59%	57%	53%	58%	59%	57%
Television	59%	53%	49%	63%	52%	62%	46%	67%	57%	54%	67%	53%	53%	57%
Two pairs of shoes	46%	62%	40%	68%	52%	60%	52%	61%	54%	55%	59%	53%	55%	54%
Unexpected expense	53%	50%	44%	59%	53%	44%	53%	50%	48%	56%	52%	51%	50%	52%
Car	54%	48%	42%	59%	52%	41%	52%	50%	48%	53%	48%	51%	52%	49%
New clothes	55%	47%	41%	57%	48%	49%	49%	49%	54%	49%	51%	51%	49%	52%
Money for self	48%	40%	43%	60%	40%	43%	41%	54%	41%	46%	50%	42%	33%	51%
Replace furniture	43%	45%	38%	52%	40%	48%	46%	47%	46%	43%	44%	44%	42%	46%
Pension payments	42%	43%	46%	38%	48%	37%	47%	33%	38%	45%	34%	45%	40%	45%
Good outfit	46%	37%	42%	49%	39%	34%	39%	44%	43%	40%	44%	40%	37%	44%
Hair done	41%	32%	26%	52%	39%	32%	38%	38%	35%	37%	39%	35%	34%	37%
Mobile phone	40%	33%	42%	33%	33%	32%	34%	39%	37%	35%	33%	37%	34%	37%
Internet at home	30%	26%	34%	16%	29%	23%	35%	19%	31%	25%	22%	29%	31%	26%
Dishwasher	13%	9%	9%	15%	12%	11%	13%	10%	15%	8%	11%	11%	11%	11%

<i>Selected Items for Children</i>	Male	Female	Younger (16-24 )	Older (65+)	Managerial and professional	Partly skilled & unskilled	Tertiary	Primary	Catholic	Protestant	Has disability	No disability	Has dependants	No dependants
New shoes	90%	92%	87%	87%	94%	88%	93%	85%	91%	91%	85%	92%	93%	89%
New clothes	70%	69%	60%	72%	69%	74%	71%	68%	71%	67%	66%	70%	69%	69%
Books	81%	86%	80%	81%	85%	83%	86%	81%	84%	84%	83%	84%	84%	84%
Homework space	78%	83%	88%	73%	81%	78%	84%	75%	81%	80%	77%	81%	83%	79%
Bedroom standard	69%	65%	73%	70%	66%	65%	64%	72%	67%	67%	72%	65%	69%	65%
Indoor games	67%	73%	78%	64%	71%	64%	77%	61%	73%	69%	68%	71%	71%	70%
Computer + int	61%	59%	64%	56%	64%	49%	64%	55%	62%	58%	58%	61%	62%	59%
Pocket money	55%	53%	39%	67%	50%	56%	50%	58%	54%	54%	60%	53%	48%	57%
Construction toys	47%	54%	49%	50%	50%	48%	55%	49%	53%	50%	46%	52%	51%	51%
Bicycle	47%	47%	44%	50%	47%	42%	50%	49%	49%	46%	47%	48%	45%	49%
Mobile for 11+	29%	28%	26%	38%	23%	30%	21%	32%	27%	31%	35%	27%	29%	28%

