



Education Committee

Thursday, 28 November 2024

**Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP,
Secretary of State for Education**

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Work and Pensions Committee

**Rt Hon Liz Kendall MP,
Secretary of State for Work and
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**Caxton House,
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Child Poverty Strategy

Dear Bridget and Liz

Thank you for your joint letter, dated 25 October, relating to the development of the Child Poverty Strategy. We have all seen the impact poverty leaves on the lives and future opportunities of our children. Therefore, it is essential that the work of the taskforce is successful in delivering a reduction in child poverty this Parliament. We hope that an ambitious strategy will also tackle the root causes of child poverty, and give every child the best start in life.

We welcome the joined-up approach that the Government is seeking to take in this area.

Addressing child poverty remains a top priority for our Committees, as it was for our predecessors. Like you, we are committed to a collaborative approach and therefore we will use the expertise and efforts of each Committee to jointly scrutinise this critical area. As such, we are beginning our scrutiny as we mean to proceed – with a joint letter seeking more information about how the Strategy will be developed and commenting on potential gaps in the current plans. In doing so, it is our intention to highlight these matters now, so they might be considered in the development stage, and not regretfully omitted when the Strategy is presented. We have divided these into issues of process and of policy.

Process

Cross-government working

The new Ministerial Child Poverty Taskforce is a welcome development to encourage cross-government working. We note that the Taskforce is supported by the Child



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Poverty Unit in the Cabinet Office, and that the Unit is comprised of officials from the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and HM Treasury.

For some of our Committee Members, the biggest driver of Child Poverty in their constituencies is among families with no recourse to public funds. As such, would it be beneficial if the Home Office had a presence within the Child Poverty Unit?

We also know that child poverty is higher amongst households that contain children, and adults, with health conditions. Health and social care services have regular contact with these households, and can play a vital role to play in identifying and supporting households and referring them to appropriate services. Given that the Child Poverty Unit is concerned with the role of public services broadly in tackling child poverty, is there also a case for the presence of the Department for Health and Social Care in the Unit?

If not, what other ways are you ensuring that the Home Office, DHSC and other relevant government departments are involved in the development of the strategy?

Evidence of comprehensive strategic thought

The Liaison Committee, in its report [Promoting national strategy: How select committee scrutiny can improve strategic thinking in Whitehall](#) (para 137), recommended that when select committees are scrutinising a strategy they should assess whether it reflects comprehensive strategic thought, and ask “whether the government has provided a clear statement of what it intends to achieve, by when, how, and with what resources; how these elements are aligned with reality, and with the rest of government; and how it will be adapted over time. If not, this would clarify the need for review”.

There are elements of the above in *Tackling Child Poverty: Developing our Strategy*, but there is an absence of information on what resources are available to deliver the Strategy. It would be helpful to have more detail about what resources are being put towards the Strategy when it is published in Spring 2025.

The characteristics of effective strategic thinking

The Liaison Committee’s report concluded (para 136) that select committees should seek evidence that characteristics of effective strategic thinking, such as a critical evaluation process and suitably extensive and effective public engagement, are present in the government’s work.



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From *Tackling Child Poverty: Developing our Strategy* this appears to be planned, through Engagement shaped by our partners; Hearing directly from children and families living in poverty; and Academic scrutiny and challenge. In relation to the last of these, it would be helpful to be updated on the remit and membership of the Analytical Expert Reference Group.

When the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions appeared before the Work and Pensions Committee on 13 November 2024, she said the Government intended to consider and monitor deep poverty as well as absolute and relative poverty as part of its Strategy. This is welcome. It would be useful to know what other metrics of poverty the Taskforce might consider, such as persistent poverty, the Social Metrics Commission's metric of poverty, or levels of destitution. Further detail on alternative measures would help ensure critical evaluation and the effective monitoring of success. Where the strategy focuses on relative poverty, it must ensure that measures are focused on lifting children out of absolute poverty, not only focusing on a relative measure which may see some better-off children becoming poorer.

Engagement with parliamentary colleagues

Your joint letter notes that a document has been published which sets out the proposed engagement plan, **including proposals for engaging with parliamentary colleagues** (emphasis added). It is not apparent from *Tackling Child Poverty: Developing our Strategy* what parliamentary engagement there will be. We would welcome clarification on this matter to enable our Committees to engage with the taskforce, and the development of the strategy.

Policy

We have set out below some instances where detailed examination of the interrelationship between DWP and DfE policies would be worthwhile in developing the Strategy. We have also identified some DWP or DfE specific areas that the Strategy could helpfully focus on:

The interrelationship between DWP and DfE policies

- Throughout this work, the Strategy must ensure that all groups of children are being taken into account and solutions developed to support specific groups – in particular, children with SEND or long-term health conditions, or those that live in households with sick or disabled adults, care-experienced children, children from minority ethnic groups, children in larger families, children in single parent households, and refugees and asylum seekers.
- We know that children with disabilities or children in families where someone is disabled are more likely to experience poverty. The Strategy must acknowledge



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the acute disadvantages experienced by such families and include cross-departmental efforts that target the most vulnerable families.

- We would expect the Strategy take into account the characteristics of and experience of child poverty in different geographical contexts: for example, reflecting regional differences and differences between rural and urban contexts.
- We would expect the strategy to consider child poverty across the UK's four nations, taking into account where powers relating to social security and education are devolved; and the effectiveness of different services which affect child poverty across the UK's four nations.
- With regard to free school meals (FSM), there are certain cliff edges in the Universal Credit (UC) system which means that some families in receipt of UC don't qualify for FSM (families must have post-tax earnings of less than £7,400). Additionally changes to the Administrative Earnings Threshold (AET) has also been shown to impact families resulting in a loss of entitlement to FSM.
- The success of policies to increase households' incomes, to support families overall, will require the successful implementation of other Government policies. For example, the right to request flexible working should hopefully enable parents to balance caring and work responsibilities more easily. The question is how this works in practice, and to what extent parents can work flexibly or pick up more hours. Our Committees have often heard that there isn't the work available for an individual to easily increase their hours.
- In relation to increases to the AET, the expectation is for more parents to increase their earnings or to increase their work search requirements. A challenge raised is that where there isn't the available or appropriate childcare, this might not be possible for parents, and this can lead to an increase in sanctions. While it is left to the discretion of work coaches to factor these circumstances in, it is our understanding that there are significant variations of how this works in practice.
- It will be interesting to see how the strategy looks to support young carers. The predecessor Work and Pensions Committee wrote to previous Government at the end of the last Parliament, raising issues with the 21-hour rule within Carers Allowance, and how that interacts with the education maintenance system. The lack of clarity in this area begs the question of who is supposed to have overall ownership for financially supporting young adult carers.

DWP focused policies

- The Government have already stated that as part of developing the Strategy it will look at the two-child benefit cap and what the funding implications are of changing that policy. This will also be the case in relation to other social security reforms aiming to increase incomes, including policy on the benefits cap.



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- In terms of reducing essential costs, the largest cost is housing, and it will be interesting to see what measures can be taken in relation to Local Housing Allowance which was not raised by inflation in the Budget.
- Another key element, in addition to increasing incomes and reducing essential costs, is to improve financial resilience and to help people find solutions to problem debt. As such it would be worthwhile exploring how DWP prioritise deductions from benefits: in particular, deductions for Child Maintenance compared to deductions for Government debts.

DfE focused policies

- As part of the work being undertaken to identify how to reduce essential costs, it would be helpful to know if this will include the costs associated with attending school such as uniforms, transport and school trips. These have been highlighted in Child Poverty Action Group's work on the cost of the school day which looks at how these types of costs affect children's participation in education. In particular, there is evidence to show that transport costs act as a barrier to children arriving at school on time for lessons, and that some children are late on days that social security benefits are paid, as they have to wait until bus fare money is available. The predecessor Education Committee's inquiry into persistent absence and support for disadvantaged children recommended that the Department ensure that all children in poverty are in receipt of FSM. As such it is essential that the Taskforce looks at the support provided through the education system such as the Pupil Premium and FSM. In particular, how the strict eligibility criteria for Pupil Premium Plus and lower value of Early Years Pupil Premium prevents some disadvantaged children and young people from experiencing the full benefits of such systems of support.
- We share the belief that a child's background must not limit their opportunity. That is why progress towards improved educational outcomes and closing the attainment gap for children from low-income households should be used to measure the success of the Strategy.
- The focus on childcare and early years is welcome. However, there are concerns about how the sector can deliver the new funded hours entitlements, and how to ensure that the funded hours cover the full cost of childcare so that parents are not having to pay high additional costs. There are also concerns about the impact of childcare policy which is seeking to incentivise parents to work on the attainment gap for children in non-working households, and the impact of childcare deserts on both parental employment and child development. These could helpfully be explored in developing the Strategy.
- The Strategy should also be alert to the non-teaching work that has been added to teachers' workload due to low capacity in other public services. In the



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predecessor Education Committee's inquiry into teacher recruitment, training and retention it heard anecdotal evidence about 'spillover' from these services with teachers washing their pupils' uniforms and of the additional workload that breakfast initiatives can add.

- School holidays can be a time of financial difficulty for many families, and the holiday activities and food programme (HAF) is a key source of support in providing children with nutritious meals and enriching activities, as well as supporting parents with childcare. The Strategy should look at the impact of this and similar schemes, look at ways of improving the financial security of these schemes, and assess what more could be done to support families through the school holidays.

We hope that these points assist in developing as comprehensive a strategy as possible – one that endures and delivers the focus of bringing about an enduring reduction in child poverty in this Parliament.

We are discussing the best way for our committees to work together to provide effective scrutiny of the Child Poverty Task Force and its work, and we will be in touch with you again shortly in this regard.

Yours sincerely

Chair, Education Committee

Chair, Work and Pensions Committee