

Written evidence from A Better Start [RCW0042]

We were thrilled to learn about the launch of your major new inquiry into the impact of the cost of living on women. As Directors of the five A Better Start Partnerships, we would like to highlight live issues from our programme areas. A Better Start is the ten-year (2015-2025), £215 million programme set-up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK.

The five A Better Start partnerships based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham, and Southend are supporting families to give their babies and very young children the best possible start in life. The programme takes place in some **of the most disadvantaged areas in the country who are feeling the strain of the cost-of-living crisis most acutely.**

The cost-of-living crisis is having an **extremely detrimental impact on families living in our wards**, and we require the government to take urgent action to support our most vulnerable babies, young children, and families, who already felt the full force of the covid-19 pandemic which widened existing inequalities.

Babies and children are the group most likely to experience poverty, combined with a range of intersectional factors:

- Around two in five children in lone-parent families are in poverty, compared with one in four of those in coupled families, with most lone parent families being led by women.¹
- Families with babies and younger children are more likely to be living in poverty than older children.²
- Larger families with more than three children are almost twice as likely to be experiencing poverty than children in one or two child families.
- Poverty disproportionately affects minority ethnic families, owing to a range of factors, including the impact of systemic racism on family life. They are two to three times more likely to experience persistent poverty, meaning that they have also been in poverty for at least two of the last three years, as well as being twice more likely to experience deep poverty, with an income less than 40% of the UK average.³
- Lone parents and families experiencing poverty and individuals with special educational needs and disabilities are increasingly at risk. Poverty rates continue to be highest for people in the social rented and private rented sectors, and much higher for households including a disabled person or an informal carer.⁴

We have highlighted evidence of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on families below.

Essential goods and services

¹ [Pre-pandemic relative poverty rate for children of lone parents almost double that for children living with two parents | Institute for Fiscal Studies \(ifs.org.uk\)](https://ifs.org.uk)

² 2020/21 poverty rates for families with a youngest child under five was 28%, and families with children under 10 were 29%, compared to 21% for families with children aged 16 to 19. [uk_poverty_2023 - the essential guide to understanding poverty in the uk 0_0.pdf \(jrf.org.uk\)](https://jrf.org.uk)

³ [633d8007a3bfa49bd4cd0fa8_Runnymede Briefing Cost of Living FINAL.pdf \(website-files.com\)](https://website-files.com)

⁴ [UK Poverty 2023: The essential guide to understanding poverty in the UK | JRF](https://jrf.org.uk)

In all 'A Better Start' sites, we see that economic status underpins a variety of broader health and wellbeing outcomes. Since autumn 2022, we have seen increased requests for financial support, fuel vouchers, and basic items needed by families such as nappies, meat, fish, and dairy. We have seen a significantly large rise in demand for Food Banks, with increased concerns from families around rising food costs, particularly the costs of baby formula. Demand for Baby Banks is also growing where those services are offered. More families are asking when food pantries open, showing the shift in need growing exponentially. Referrals to a second-hand baby equipment and clothing provider service⁵ saw a more than five time increase in 2023 compared to 2022.

The rising cost of utilities, rent and food shopping has meant that more families are struggling to buy essentials and to make the money they have last until the next payment arrives.⁶ Parents in ABS areas have expressed significantly increased pressures of day-to-day life and the subsequent effect on increasing levels of need and engagement with government support services. Families feel overwhelmed juggling parenthood and work and seeking support can be a struggle.

Inequality and family composition

Migrants with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) do not get access to a welfare safety net. Further, migrant families with one full-time and one part-time worker and a small child are at much higher risk of poverty, even if their joint income is far above the median national wage, showing the systemic disadvantage migrant families face.⁷ Surveys done during the height of pandemic restriction in 2020 found that ethnic minority and financially insecure families had a worse experience during the lockdown across most domains.⁸ Key findings from longer-term follow up in *May and July 2021*⁹ showed that the increase in financial insecurity which rose sharply during the pandemic has not returned to pre-COVID-19 baseline levels. Several characteristics were found to be predictors of longer-term financial insecurity - including homeowner status, free school meal eligibility and not working. Notably, mothers of Pakistani Heritage were found to have the greatest risk of experiencing financial insecurity throughout the pandemic. A Better Start partnerships support families in these challenging circumstances who are particularly at risk of the rising costs of household items, rent and other bills.

Health risks

As the cost of living crisis deepens, more families are unable to buy enough food that adheres to the government's 'Eatwell Guide' recommendations.¹⁰ There is a strong link between children living with obesity and deprivation - 10.1% of reception age children (age four to five) were obese in 2021/22, with a further 12.1% overweight.¹¹ Women are increasingly asking about what is essential for their babies, wanting to purchase cheaper products, which can create adverse health impacts for mothers and babies. Breastfeeding can cut the chances of a child becoming obese by up to 25%¹², yet increased deprivation is associated with

⁵ ['Around Again': Building a community support project | SSBC \(smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk\)](https://smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk)

⁶ Reported by A Better Start Blackpool

⁷ Mikolaj, Julia, Kulu, Hill, Meyer, Traute and Bridgen, Paul (2022) *Poverty and the UK post-Brexit points-based immigration system* ESRC Centre for Population Change 4pp.

⁸ Dickerson J, Kelly B, Lockyer B, et al. Experiences of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic: descriptive findings from a survey of families in the Born in Bradford study. Wellcome Open Res. 2021 Feb 26;5:228. doi: 10.12688/wellcomeopenres.16317.2. PMID: 33709038; PMCID: PMC7927208.

⁹ Reece S, Dickerson J, Kelly B, McEachan RRC, Pickett KE. The long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on financial insecurity in vulnerable families: findings from the Born in Bradford Covid-19 longitudinal study. PLOSOne Submitted Nov 23.

¹⁰ Scott, C., Sutherland, J. and Taylor, A. (2021) *Affordability of the UK's Eatwell Guide*. The Food Foundation. Available at https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/Affordability-of-the-Eatwell-Guide_Final_Web-Version.pdf

¹¹ [Obesity statistics - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\)](https://www.parliament.uk/library/research-and-briefing-papers/lp00017)

decreased breastfeeding initiation¹³, showing that poverty can create health inequalities right from the earliest stages of life. As more families are plunged into debt or cannot afford to pay their household bills, the effects of cold homes and poverty will have a long-lasting detrimental impact on child development. Cold homes increase the risk of respiratory illnesses such as RSV and asthma, and if families already have poorer health this can be exasperated by their living conditions.¹⁴

One study showed that there are strong associations between financial insecurity and maternal health and wellbeing outcomes, with mothers experiencing financial insecurity being more likely to report unsatisfactory general health and clinically important symptoms of depression and anxiety.¹⁵ Low incomes are also associated with lack of sleep, lacking energy, and feelings of depression, which can exacerbate existing perinatal mental health struggles. Since autumn 2022 the partnerships have seen increased requests for parental mental health support amidst rising financial pressures. Survivors of domestic abuse have additionally reported that abusers are using the crisis to further restrict women's access to finances, making it harder to leave¹⁶.

Children's educational outcomes

For children, even at a young age, there is a gap in educational attainment by parental income level. Our sites show inequalities in early language development between children from more affluent and poorer areas, which is of further concern for children with special educational needs and disabilities. Families are not getting the statutory support needed to care for their children with complex needs.

Below are some suggested approaches to address these issues, based on our evidence base and which we would be delighted to provide further information about:¹⁷

Early intervention

It is evident that providing early intervention and universal services for pregnant people and families is a crucial avenue to target the negative impacts of inequality. Across the ABS partnerships, a range of innovative approaches are being offered which aim to provide early support that negates intensive late interventions.

- The award-winning Early Intervention Speech and Language Team targets families with children aged 9 months to 4 years, offering support at the earliest opportunity.¹⁸ The services aim to build parents and caregivers' skills and confidence in supporting their child's language development. Such

¹² [Breastfeeding reduces child obesity risk by up to 25%, WHO finds - Baby Friendly Initiative \(unicef.org.uk\)](https://www.who.int/news/item/15-05-2023-breastfeeding-reduces-child-obesity-risk-by-up-to-25%-who-finds-baby-friendly-initiative)

¹³ [Breastfeeding practices in the United Kingdom: Is the neighbourhood context important? - PMC \(nih.gov\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36811111/)

¹⁴ Reported by A Better Start Blackpool

¹⁵ Reece S, Dickerson J, Kelly B, McEachan RRC, Pickett KE. The long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on financial insecurity in vulnerable families: findings from the Born in Bradford Covid-19 longitudinal study. PLOSOne Submittd Nov 23.

¹⁶ [The cost of living - Women's Aid \(womensaid.org.uk\)](https://www.womensaid.org.uk/cost-of-living/)

¹⁷ To note the ABS partnerships all offer a different range of interventions, based on local need and demographic of families. Therefore, each site may offer different interventions.

¹⁸ <https://www.nurseryworldawards.com/2023-winners>

services can facilitate early access to specialist support for children with previously undetected SEND.¹⁹

- A Maternity Continuity of Care team provides fully personalised, holistic care to women most at risk in the community in the antenatal, intrapartum, and postnatal periods, including for homebirths. The site also developed the Maternity Vulnerability Assessment Tool (MatVAT), which helps consistently identify social risk factors in pregnant women. Earlier identification and support can result in fewer inequalities and greater health equity for pregnant women and their babies.²⁰

A fully delivered universal public health offer for babies and young children

A new initiative which has been making a difference to families is free 'Save and Play' sessions, which show families how to use everyday household items to engage in play with their babies and children. It additionally provides information and practical support, such as help applying for Healthy Start or completing discretionary support forms. Ensuring mothers, babies and young children receive the full entitlement of the Healthy Start scheme is an important aspect of improving inequalities in health outcomes. This includes ensuring that Healthy Start funding increases are in line with inflation, to ensure the accessibility of protective dietary elements such as fruits and vegetables amidst rising costs. Work in Nottingham ABS wards has improved uptake of the scheme, and learning from improvements at a local level can contribute to delivery on a national level.

Creating employment opportunities for women

NCB and the National Lottery Community Fund have published a [report on Workforce Innovation](#), highlighting the recruitment and retention crisis facing the wider early years sector.

It highlights how jobs typically associated with women's roles – such as care work in the early years workforce – have been perpetually stigmatised and undervalued. This has negative implications for both the majority women in the sector who are more likely to experience poverty themselves, and the families that they serve.²¹

A Better Start has a range of ways to integrate parent voice and lived experience across their programmes and working structures. This includes [Parent Champion](#) and [Family Mentor programmes](#).²² Research findings from the [National Lottery Community Fund Women and Girl's initiative](#) found having women deliver services who had lived experience of issues themselves leads to a positive impact on how services are developed and delivered. Involvement can also help mothers and other carers gain skills needed to enter the workforce in the longer term. A highly trained, well-supported, and well-paid early years workforce is beneficial for family health and wellbeing and has the potential to lift families out of poverty.

Commitment to end child poverty

We strongly recommend the government set targets relating to the eradication of child poverty, and to coproduce with children, young people and parents a child poverty strategy which takes into account wider

¹⁹ [Parent-implemented language intervention delivered by therapy assistants for two-year-olds at risk of language difficulties: A case series - David McDonald, Sarah Colmer, Susan Guest, Dawn Humber, Charlotte Ward, Jane Young, 2019 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

²⁰ Delivered by LEAP

²¹ [a-workforce-in-crisis-saving-our-early-years.pdf \(pacey.org.uk\)](#)

²² Delivered by A Better Start

social determinants including housing, employment, education, childcare costs and wider economic levels, to adequately address the impact of the cost of living crisis on families.

Without urgent attention on the issue, the crisis will have a drastic impact on the most vulnerable women and girls, including failing to give babies and young children the support that they need to have the best start in life.

November 2023