

Written evidence from the North East Child Poverty Commission and Children North East (CPM0035)

Introduction

The [North East Child Poverty Commission](#) (NECPC) is a stakeholder network of representatives from different sectors in the region, which works to build support for actions that improve the lives of the more than 1 in 3 children and young people growing up in poverty in the North East of England. With an overarching aim to 'provide a strong regional voice to raise awareness of the issue of child poverty in the North East and to work collaboratively to tackle the problem', NECPC is hosted by - but independent of - Newcastle University.

[Children North East](#) is the region's oldest children's charity, celebrating its 130th anniversary in 2021. Last year it provided life-changing support to 3,921 babies, children and young people from across the North East through 28 different projects. In addition, its unique Poverty Proofing the School Day initiative, which identifies barriers to school engagement through listening to the voice of pupils, worked with over 17,100 primary and secondary pupils in the region and more than 25,300 pupils elsewhere in the country.

We are making a joint submission to this inquiry as regional organisations committed to tackling the effects of poverty and inequality on children and young people in the North East. This is an issue of particular concern for our region with 35% of children living below the poverty line in 2018/19 (the second highest rate in the UK behind London)¹, and having experienced the steepest increase in child poverty levels of any part of the country between 2014/15 and 2018/19 – rising by 9 percentage points, from 26% to 35%, over that time period².

Measurement and targets

Whilst recognising that it rarely has a single cause, it is complex and multi-faceted, we are firmly of the belief that poverty – and therefore child poverty – is primarily a structural problem in society, not the fault of individuals or people's characteristics, and its defining feature is families not having enough resources to meet their basic needs and participate fully in society.

Pre-pandemic, this translated into our region having, for example, the highest proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (23.5%)³, the highest proportion of children living in families with little or no savings to shield them from economic shocks (71%)⁴, and the highest proportion of children in households lacking the resources to keep warm enough (11.5%), replace or repair broken electrical goods (29.6%), engage in a hobby or leisure activity (10.2%), take a holiday for one week a year not staying with relatives (46.2%), or go on a school trip at least once a term (6.3%)⁵.

Any effective measure of child poverty must therefore be income-based, and – as we are of the view that poverty is a relational concept – we believe the **relative income measure** of child poverty remains the most appropriate way to measure its scale, calculated **after housing costs** have been taken into account, as this represents a more accurate measure of a family's available income.

We are also of the belief that child poverty is highly policy-responsive and not inevitable in one of the largest economies in the world – indeed, whilst the North East experienced the steepest recent increase in child poverty rates of anywhere in the country, it also saw the largest fall in child poverty between 1999 and 2013

¹ All figures provided for child poverty rates in this submission refer to relative child poverty, after housing costs

² <https://nechildpoverty.org.uk/news/true-extent-of-levelling-up-challenge-revealed>

³ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/105ef74f-ffc5-4c28-9831-32a6a276aa7f>

⁴ <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media-centre/most-uk-children-pay-cheque-away-going-without-essentials-like-food/>

⁵ Bradshaw J (2020), 'Child poverty in the North East region', briefing, Child Poverty Action Group/University of York/Social Policy Research Unit. <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Child%20poverty%20in%20the%20NE.pdf>

(by 13 percentage points),⁶ which demonstrates what can be achieved with political will and action to increase family incomes.

Reintroducing clear, ambitious, income-related targets for reducing child poverty – with a Secretary of State accountable to Parliament for meeting them – is therefore important for several reasons:

- To demonstrate the priority placed by Government on tackling this issue;
- To recognise that increasing family income is the most important means by which to reduce child poverty;
- To acknowledge that Government has a pivotal role to play in reducing child poverty; and
- To act as means by which Government can be held to account for progress made against targets set.

Joint working

Equally important as setting child poverty reduction targets is having a comprehensive, cross-Departmental Government strategy in place to achieve them, with a Secretary of State responsible for overseeing the successful implementation of this strategy, regularly monitoring progress and measuring the effectiveness of poverty reduction interventions, as well as the impact of other Government policies which may hinder targets being met.

There is a substantial amount of evidence on the negative, stigmatising and often lifelong effects of child poverty, including on physical health, mental wellbeing, educational and economic outcomes.⁷ Given the wide-ranging nature of this impact and the political buy-in necessary to address them, it is critical that this comprehensive child poverty strategy sits across all relevant Government Departments, but ownership of it is held by one in order to prevent issues ‘falling through the cracks’.

And, given, the differential rates of child poverty across the country and different local factors which can affect family incomes (e.g. housing costs, local labour market conditions, levels of in-work poverty and availability of affordable childcare), it is vital that local child poverty strategies are developed alongside and add value to a national strategy – with local authorities and other public and VCS partners properly resourced to implement them.

In contrast, a significant proportion of local resources and activity to tackle child poverty over the last decade has been largely focussed on mitigating the negative impacts of national policies on the lowest income families. There is a growing consensus across sectors that what is needed now is a raft of complementary and connected social security policies and local services which will tackle the underlying causes of poverty with targets to measure progress.

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⁶ Round A and Longlands S (2020) Child poverty and devolution in North East England, IPPR North.

<http://www.ippr.org/research/publications/child-poverty-and-devolution>

⁷ See, for example, Cooper K and Stewart K (2017) Does Money Affect Children’s Outcomes? An update, CASEpaper 203, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics. <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper203.pdf>, and Round A and Longlands S (2020) Child poverty and devolution in North East England, IPPR North.

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