

IMPROVING CHILDREN'S LIFE CHANCES

SUMMARY SEPTEMBER 2016

This year, the government will publish its first ever life chances strategy. In a new book, *Improving Children's Life Chances*, published by Child Poverty Action Group, leading experts from research, policy and practice:

- discuss the implications of the shift to 'life chances' as a focus of social policy;
- set out measures to improve children's life chances from a range of perspectives, including health, housing, family life, early years, education and social mobility; and
- explain why we can't aspire to improving children's life chances unless we take action to reduce child poverty.

WHAT DOES A LIFE CHANCES AGENDA MEAN?

Life chances is a central motif of this government's social policy, bringing with it a welcome focus on tackling poverty and disadvantage and making opportunities more equal. It is a framework which invites us to pay attention to the quality of childhood as an end in itself, as well as a means to progressing in adult life.

We take life chances to mean prospects for a happy, healthy childhood, as well as a secure and fulfilling adulthood. A life chances strategy must go beyond the social mobility agenda, which tends to focus on the extent to which people's social and economic starting points affect their chances of gaining qualifications and climbing the career ladder in later life. To improve life chances we also need to reduce the profound inequalities in children's starting points and in their experiences of childhood.

Improving Children's Life Chances discusses how this can be done, and sets out a range of indicators by which success could be measured. The recommendations span health, early years, housing, education, family life and support for young people moving into work. The common thread is that these will have limited impact as long as children continue to grow up in poverty.

WHY WE CAN'T TALK ABOUT LIFE CHANCES WITHOUT TALKING ABOUT POVERTY

Ensuring families have enough money to live on is critical to improving children's life chances. Children born in poverty have lower birthweights and higher infant mortality, and

are more likely to experience a wide range of physical and mental health and behavioural problems. When incomes rise, these problems are reduced. Child poverty also has knock-on consequences for adult lives – a lower chance of attaining good qualifications at school, for example, and a higher risk of life-limiting health conditions.

One reason is a simple lack of material resources: money for a healthy diet in pregnancy and for children; adequate heating; children's toys and books; computers; school trips; equipment for college courses; bus fares to doctors' appointments; and so on. Some are due to inadequate housing and living conditions: overcrowded, cold, damp or mouldy homes; a lack of space to do homework or for older children's privacy; a lack of safe outdoor places in which to play. Experiencing homelessness has a profound effect on children's wellbeing and engagement at school.

The stress and anxiety caused by money worries also has negative impacts on both parents and children, as does the sense of exclusion and shame which children may experience when they are unable to join in activities with their friends, or when they are bullied for being poor. All these factors make it much harder for parents in financial hardship to provide the same opportunities and environments for their children as better-off parents.

On the other hand, evidence shows that when low-income families see their incomes rise, parents are less likely to be stressed or depressed and are more able to give their children time and encouragement. They also spend more money on fruit and vegetables, and on clothes, toys and books for their children, and less on unhealthy items like tobacco and alcohol.

POVERTY IS RISING – PUTTING LIFE CHANCES AT RISK

In 2014/15, 3.9 million children in the UK – 29 per cent of the nation’s children – were living below the poverty line. Between 1999 and 2009 this figure fell from 33 per cent to 27 per cent, but it now appears to be starting to rise again. And projections indicate that under current policy conditions, poverty rates may increase by as much as 50 per cent by the end of the decade.

Two-thirds of poor children have at least one parent in work. Although employment rates are high, work is by no means a guaranteed route out of poverty, thanks to a cocktail of low pay, low-hours or insecure jobs and the lack of progression opportunities available to many parents. In recent years, the benefits that support families have also failed to keep pace with the cost of living, due to a series of cuts, freezes and sub-inflation uprating decisions. With the transition from tax credits to universal credit, the entire system of in-work support will become far less generous. And policies like the benefit cap and two-child limit (the latter due to come into force in 2017) restrict the total amount of benefit a family can receive and will push many children into hardship.

WHAT SHOULD THE LIFE CHANCES STRATEGY INCLUDE?

To be credible, a strategy to improve the life chances of the UK’s children must put reducing poverty centre stage,

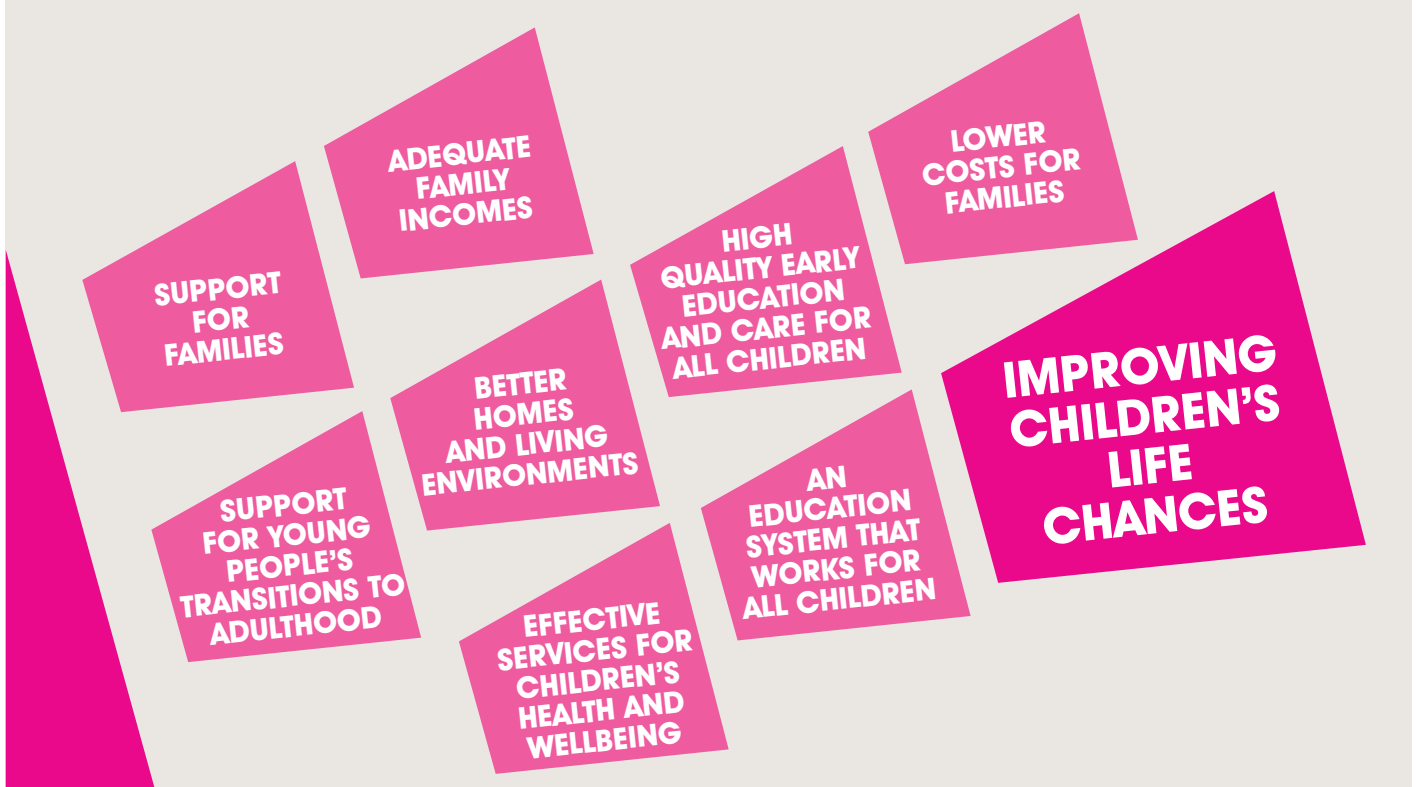
and promote action across a range of sectors to improve children’s health, wellbeing and development, particularly measures that mitigate the damaging effects of poverty.

Adequate family incomes

To ensure families have a secure and adequate income to meet the needs of their children, we recommend that a life chances strategy:

- commits to raising the so-called ‘national living wage’ to the level of the voluntary living wage over time, and to raising pay across the board in low-paid sectors;
- adopts labour market policies that create opportunities for progression from entry-level jobs;
- strengthens employee protection and prevents exploitative practices, such as the inappropriate use of zero-hour and self-employed contracts;
- continues to invest in childcare provision for pre-school children of all ages, including for parents who work atypical hours, moving towards universal maintained-sector provision from the age of one;
- develops a programme of extended schools, providing 8am–6pm childcare in both term time and holidays;
- restores the value of children’s benefits and commits to annual uprating at least in line with inflation;
- removes arbitrary limits (such as the benefit cap and two-child limit) to support for children;
- raises work allowances in universal credit, particularly for second earners and single parents;
- ensures that housing allowances keep pace with available rents.

KEY ELEMENTS OF A LIFE CHANCES STRATEGY



Key indicators to track progress need to include relative and absolute low-income, material deprivation, persistent poverty, and poverty depth.

Lower costs for families

The cost to families of raising a child from birth to age 18 is around £150,000 – over £8,000 a year. Rents are soaring, as more and more families are housed in the private rented sector, childcare costs have outstripped both inflation and government rates of support, and poor families often pay a premium for basic goods like food, energy and cash withdrawals. Transport can also be unaffordable for struggling families, especially in rural areas. The life chances strategy could usefully include steps to reduce costs, such as:

- regulating costs in the private rented sector and longer term tenancies;
- quotas for building genuinely affordable rented homes;
- investment in a universal free childcare service;
- regulations to protect low-income consumers from unfair pricing – eg, of energy;
- greater regulation of public transport routes and fares to ensure buses are affordable and available where needed.

Key indicators would include housing affordability, fuel poverty, and childcare utilisation.

Better homes and living environments

A safe, warm and secure home, together with a healthy environment, provides the foundation for good life chances. As well as reducing the cost of housing, we recommend:

- higher minimum standards for the energy efficiency and quality of rented homes;
- quotas for building genuinely affordable rented homes and funding for councils to replace council homes sold under the 'right to buy';
- adequate funding for local authorities to maintain parks, sports grounds, leisure facilities, youth centres and libraries;
- more protections for renters and longer tenancies.

Key indicators would include overcrowding, homelessness, and children in non-decent homes.

High-quality early education and care for all children

The early years are critical for children's development and an effective life chances strategy should adopt evidence-based approaches, including:

- a two-generation approach, combining early years provision with support for parents to improve the home learning environment, delivered through expanded high-quality children's centres;
- the gradual extension of the 30 hours' free childcare offer for three- and four-year-olds, and the part-time offer for two-year-olds, to all children, regardless of parents' circumstances;

- a workforce development strategy aimed primarily at the private childcare sector, backed with investment. Continuing professional development provision should be built in for all staff and increased public subsidies could be made at least partially dependent on providers delivering this.

Key indicators would include access to high quality early education and child development measures.

Support for families

The family environment is central to life chances and all parents strive to provide the best for their children. But if parents do not have enough money, this is harder. We recommend:

- enhanced spending on low-income families to foster strong home learning environments, such as the provision of educational resources or programmes for adult literacy and numeracy, which could be supported by children's centres;
- universal maternity and parenting support to meet families' needs across the social gradient and for different ages of children;
- a national programme of support for separating and separated parents, and for stepfamilies.

Key indicators would include the development and attainment of children, including those in single parent families, and adult literacy and numeracy rates.

Effective services for children's health and wellbeing

Reducing income inequality would go a long way to improving the health of children. Poverty should be urgently recognised as a public health issue. We recommend that a life chances strategy should include:

- a commitment to improving health outcomes by reducing socio-economic deprivation and tackling its impacts on health;
- high-quality universal antenatal and maternity services that meet needs across the social gradient, with additional targeted support for mothers who need it;
- recognising children's mental health as a public health priority, backed by investment in support for families and children, starting before birth;
- a local commissioner accountability for children's overall mental health – eg, through a 'local offer' similar to that for children with special educational needs;
- more flexible models of care and partnership working by child and adolescent mental health services, with additional resources directed to difficulties which disproportionately affect poor children.

Key indicators would include health inequalities, health behaviours, mortality, accidental injuries, subjective wellbeing, self-harm and suicides.

An education system that works for all children

Children's home lives are probably the greatest influence on their educational attainment, but schools can do a great deal to ensure that children are not held back by poverty. We recommend:

- an increase in compensatory spending within schools, such as the 'pupil premium', which should be targeted at proven measures that boost the attainment of disadvantaged children at all ages including in the early years;
- strong government regulatory efforts to minimise social segregation in education and promote a balanced social mix of pupils across schools, especially in a context of increasing school autonomy on admissions;
- the adoption by schools of strong anti-bullying programmes and efforts to minimise the costs of participation – eg, uniforms, equipment and trips.

Key indicators would include attainment at a range of ages, exclusions, experience of bullying and school quality measures.

Support for young people's transitions to adulthood

To date, most efforts to support young people into the labour market have focused on developing their skills. Measures such as the apprenticeship levy have much potential. But, in addition to this, we argue that it is time to look at the labour market and take steps to ensure that it serves young people well, and that they are not left in financial insecurity, by, for example:

- careful monitoring of new apprenticeship places to ensure they benefit disadvantaged young people and are of a level and quality to improve life chances. It may be necessary to increase subsidies for 16–18-year-olds or to take active steps to encourage employers to develop quality apprenticeships and take on under-25-year-olds;
- a policy focus on creating real opportunities for young workers beyond apprenticeships, whether through tax incentives for employers or investment in industries that generate high-quality jobs for young people;
- an end to the practice of unpaid internships;
- steps to help young people start their adult lives without facing financial insecurity or a heavy burden of debt. We recommend starting with an assessment of the impacts of recent policies affecting young people's finances, such as restrictions to housing benefit and increased tuition fees, so policies which may be causing hardship or debt can be addressed.

Key indicators would include the number of quality apprenticeships, job quality and security for young people, and youth poverty.

Improving Children's Life Chances

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