



State of the Nations: lessons in tackling child poverty from across the four nations

October 2024

Summary and recommendations

- Child poverty has been rising across the UK over the past decade, driven by large cuts to the social security system.
 - Looking forward, CPAG analysis shows child poverty will rise in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, unless we see urgent policy changes. The key driver of this increase is the two-child limit.
 - In Scotland, we can expect to see a large reduction in child poverty due to the Scottish child payment. Although, without further reform, poverty will start to rise again in Scotland, primarily due to the UK-wide two-child limit.
 - **The two-child limit must be abolished urgently, to prevent further rises in child poverty across the UK.**
 - In the absence of leadership from Westminster in recent years, devolved governments and local authorities have developed their own strategies to tackle child poverty.
 - In Scotland, a combination of ambitious targets, robust reporting measures, and specific policies including investment in children's benefits via the Scottish child payment is forecast to reduce child poverty substantially, although more will be needed to meet the target of less than 10 per cent of children in poverty by 2030.
 - In Wales and Northern Ireland, while the publication of child poverty/anti-poverty strategies is welcome, the lack of targets and specific policies to address family income risk a lack of meaningful action in either country to tackle child poverty.
 - In England, despite the best efforts of some local authorities, the absence of a child poverty strategy at a UK level and of specific support that exists in the devolved nations (universal free school meals, help with uniform costs) mean children and families fare particularly badly.
 - The UK government has committed to developing a UK-wide cross-government child poverty strategy, which is a hugely welcome step. **This strategy must include policies that invest in the social security system, as the main policy lever for preventing and reducing child poverty. It must also include ambitious targets and significant milestones to achieve if it is to be successful in reducing child poverty.**
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- Devolved nations and local areas will be key partners in the successful delivery of a UK-wide strategy. Obligations placed on local authorities as part of the strategy will need to be adequately resourced.
- Investment in social security at the UK level will provide a strong foundation to ensure both the UK child poverty strategy and strategies at a devolved and local level can work in tandem to deliver the long-term change that is needed on employment, housing, childcare, education, and services for children and young people.

Introduction

4.3 million children are living in poverty in the UK today. These children and their families are living in every corner of the UK: in rich areas and poor areas, in big cities and rural villages. Some of the challenges these families face look different depending on where they live, but they are united in a common experience of not having enough money to provide the basics for their children and the childhood that all children deserve.

This has to change, and there are opportunities on the horizon that could shift the dial on child poverty. The UK government has committed to developing a UK-wide cross-government child poverty strategy and has established a taskforce responsible for developing this strategy. The strategy is due to be published in spring 2025.

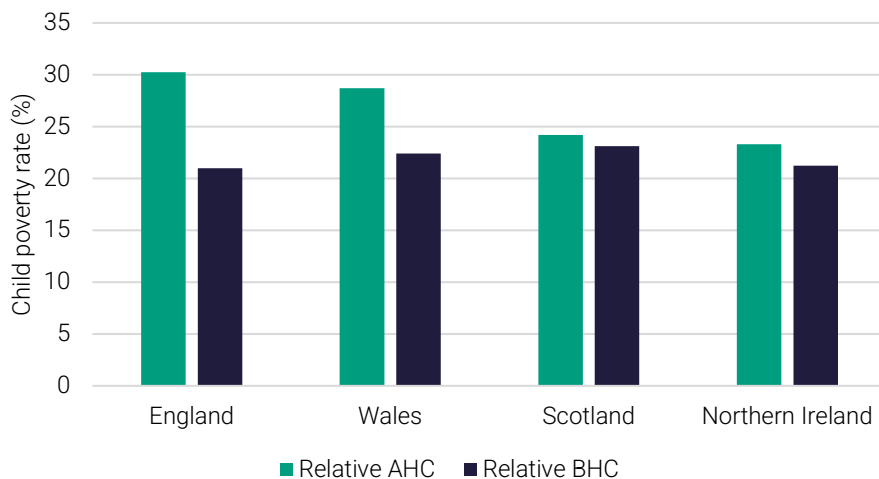
The last time the UK government embarked on developing a child poverty strategy, under New Labour, governance of the UK looked very different. Devolution of powers to the devolved nations was in its infancy, and the decentralisation of powers to English regions was just beginning. Today, the devolved nations have their own established parliaments and governments with responsibilities for many areas critical to the reduction of child poverty, like education, housing and childcare. English combined authorities have an increasing role in many of the services that children and families interact with, and there are plans on the table for further devolution to English regions. It is in this devolved context that a new UK-wide cross-government child poverty strategy must emerge.

This report is designed to offer a useful starting point for some of these conversations. It begins by examining what child poverty looks like across the four nations, and recent trends in child poverty over time. It then sets out the different child poverty strategies that have been developed by governments to tackle child poverty. In our analysis we pay particular attention to the role of social security, given the cuts to its value over recent years which have been the main driver of rising child poverty across the UK, and the critical role social security plays in preventing and reducing child poverty. The report concludes with some key lessons from experiences of developing child poverty strategies in the devolved nations, to inform the future development of a UK-wide cross-government child poverty strategy.

Child poverty rates across the nations

To understand what is happening to child poverty across the four nations of the UK, we need to look at the latest data (2022/23) and analyse recent trends.

Figure 1: Percentage of children in poverty in 2022/23 by nation



Source: *Households Below Average Income 2022/23*, Department for Work and Pensions, 2024.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of children in relative poverty in 2022/23 (the latest data available) across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland both after housing costs (AHC) and before housing costs (BHC).¹ We can see that England and Wales have higher relative AHC poverty rates than Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, relative BHC poverty rates are very similar. This indicates that higher housing costs in England and Wales are a key reason for higher relative AHC poverty in those nations. We can also see that relative AHC poverty is higher than relative BHC poverty everywhere. This is because low-income households spend a high proportion of their income on housing.

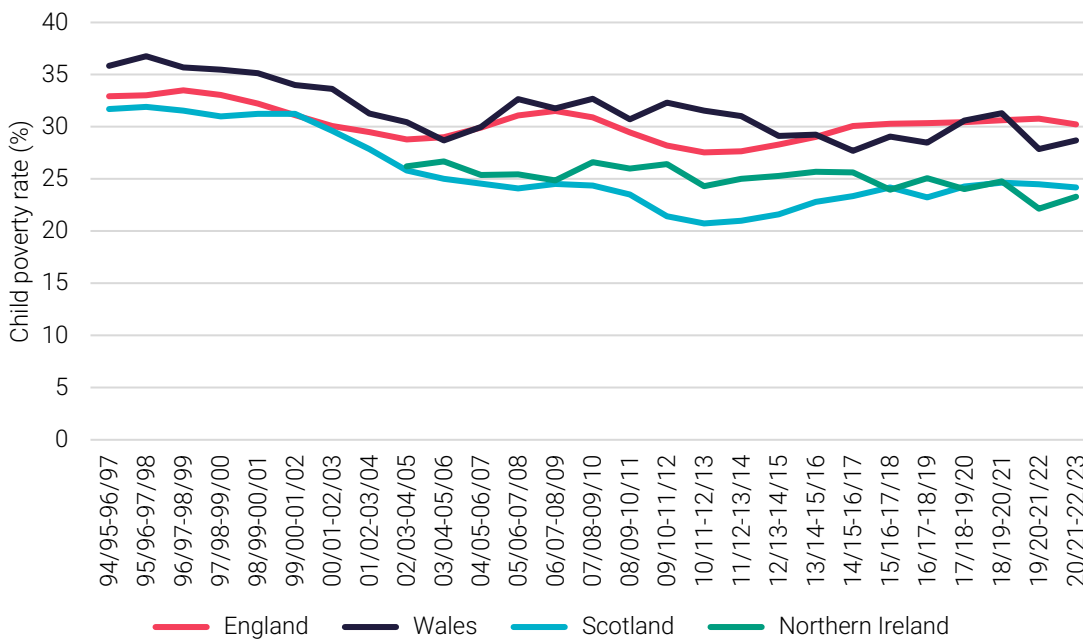
Looking back

It is not just the current level of poverty that is important – trends can tell us more about the driving factors behind child poverty. Figure 2 shows that trends in relative AHC child poverty across the four nations broadly follow the same pattern.²

¹ The poverty rates shown are a two-year average of 2021/22 and 2022/23. Normally, a three-year average is used for sample size reasons. However, the 2020/21 data collection was interrupted by Covid and as such that data was deemed not suitable for analysis.

² Data for Northern Ireland started in 2002/03.

Figure 2: Trends in relative AHC child poverty across the four nations



Source: *Households Below Average Income 2022/23*, Department for Work and Pensions, 2024.

Child poverty was greater than 30 per cent in England, Wales and Scotland in the 1990s, before falling in the first half of the 2000s. There was then a plateau, before poverty fell again in the latter half of the 2000s. In the 2010s, poverty rose or stayed flat across the four nations. The fact that poverty across the four nations followed similar trends is unsurprising: for most of this period devolved administrations had little power over the policy levers which directly affect household income and therefore poverty.

The key factor behind the UK trends is the change in the adequacy of social security. For instance, from 1999/00 to 2004/05, a lone parent with one child in part-time work saw the cash value of their benefits increase by nearly 50 per cent.³ Then, from 2004/05 to 2007/08, poverty rose as social security was only increased in line with inflation, despite there being strong economic growth. From 2007/08 to 2009/10 poverty fell as median income fell due to a recession, while benefits were increased in real terms over the period.

Since 2010/11, child poverty has risen again, primarily because of cuts to social security. The UK government now spends £50 billion a year less on social security than it would have spent if cuts, freezes and other changes since 2010 hadn't happened.⁴ Households with children have borne the brunt of these cuts, with regressive policies like the two-child limit and the benefit cap almost exclusively affecting families with children. These trends demonstrate how critical investment in social security is if we are to begin to reduce child poverty levels across the four nations.

³ M Brewer and others, [Child Poverty in the UK since 1998-99: lessons from the past decade](#), Working Paper 10/23, Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2010

⁴ Author's calculations from the Policy Measures Database, March 2024. The sum of all policies in the 'Social security benefits', 'Tax credits', 'Welfare inside cap' and 'Welfare outside cap' categories for 2022/23, except 'Devolving disability benefits to the Scottish government.' These cover all policies announced from the 2010 Budget to the 2024 Spring Statement.

Looking forward

It is difficult to forecast precisely what will happen to child poverty in each devolved nation, especially with a new government in place in Westminster. But assuming benefits are updated with inflation, the two-child limit remains in place and there is modest real earnings growth (as is currently forecast), CPAG forecasts show child poverty will rise across most of the UK. The key driver of this increase is the continued roll-out of the two-child limit.

Table 1: Forecast impact on child poverty over the next five years

	Overall effect	Largest driver of rising poverty	Largest driver of falling poverty
UK	Slight rise	Two-child limit	Possible impact of a UK child poverty strategy (unknown)
England	Slight rise	Two-child limit	Possible impact of a UK child poverty strategy (unknown)
Scotland	Large fall	Two-child limit	Scottish child payment and Scotland child poverty strategy
Wales	Slight rise	Two-child limit	Possible impacts of Wales/UK child poverty strategies (unknown)
Northern Ireland	Slight rise	Two-child limit	Possible impacts of NI/UK child poverty strategies (unknown)

Note: The results presented here are based on UKMOD version B1.12. UKMOD is maintained, developed and managed by the Centre for Microsimulation and Policy Analysis (CeMPA) at the University of Essex. The results and their interpretation are the author's sole responsibility.

Table 1 shows what we might expect to see happening to child poverty across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland over the next five years. Across all areas of the UK the largest driver of rising child poverty is the two-child limit.

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, there are currently no targeted policies in place that would substantially reduce child poverty. Therefore we would expect poverty rates to rise slightly. However, there is potential for child poverty rates to fall if action is taken following the implementation of child poverty strategies (discussed further below).

In Scotland, we expect to see a large reduction in child poverty due to the Scottish child payment (see Scotland section below). However, if the level of the payment is not updated in real terms over time and the two-child limit remains in place, child poverty will then start to rise again, albeit from a much lower base.

Tackling child poverty across the nations

In the 2000s, a UK-wide cross-government child poverty strategy led to hundreds of thousands of children being lifted out of poverty, the largest reduction in child poverty in any OECD country.⁵ This child poverty strategy placed responsibilities on devolved governments to take action on child poverty and required local authorities to develop their own child poverty action plans. This was enshrined in the Child

⁵ R Joyce and L Sibieta, 'An assessment of Labour's record on income inequality and poverty', *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 29(1), 2013, pp178-202

Poverty Act 2010, but a change in government led to less focus on child poverty, and the Act was repealed in 2016. Since then, there has not been a government strategy in place to tackle child poverty at a UK level.

However, there have been significant developments at a devolved level. This section examines in more detail what each nation is doing to combat child poverty, focusing particularly on Scotland, as actions taken there are forecast to lead to large reductions in child poverty.⁶

Scotland

Child Poverty Act

In 2015 the UK government decided to remove the four child poverty income targets, mandated by the 2010 Child Poverty Act, from its legislation. The Scottish government took a different approach and introduced its own income-based targets for child poverty reduction into legislation under the new Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, which was passed with cross-party support.

The 2017 Act mandates:

- Four income targets, to be met in the financial year beginning 1 April 2030, including relative AHC child poverty to be at or below 10 per cent.
- Four interim income targets, to be met in the financial year beginning 1 April 2023, including relative AHC child poverty to be at or below 18 per cent.
- A Poverty and Inequality Commission (established from 1 July 2019) with functions related to the child poverty reduction targets.
- Scottish ministers to publish child poverty delivery plans in 2018, 2022 and 2026, and report on those plans annually.
- Local authorities and health boards to report jointly every year on activity they are taking, and will take, to reduce child poverty.

Some social security powers were devolved to the Scottish government through the Scotland Act 2016. Social Security Scotland was set up in 2018 with eight guiding principles – including that social security is a human right, to be delivered as a public service and that it is to contribute to the reducing of poverty and provide dignity and respect to Scottish citizens. The Scottish Commission on Social Security was also set up to scrutinise Scottish government policy decisions and to ensure that the Scottish government and Social Security Scotland are fulfilling their legal requirements under the Bill.

These powers enabled the roll-out of poverty reducing policies. The introduction of the Scottish child payment (through the power to create new social security benefits), the mitigation of the benefit cap (through discretionary housing payments) and increased eligibility for Best Start (through power to legislate for welfare foods) were all made possible via the 2016 Act.

Scottish child payment and other policies

In order to reduce child poverty in line with the statutory targets, the Scottish government implemented a series of measures, including the headline Scottish child payment. Due to the lag in obtaining data, we do not yet know if the Scottish government has been successful in meeting the target.⁷ However, the

⁶ [Child poverty cumulative impact assessment: update](#), Scottish government, 2024

⁷ Child poverty remained constant at 24 per cent in 2022/23, despite some of the policies having been rolled out. Examining the data it is difficult to pinpoint precisely why child poverty did not slightly fall as expected. It may just be down to statistical variation in the data (which is why three-year averages are ideally needed) but we will need to wait for more data to be released in order to put the 2022/23 figure in more context.

Scottish government has forecast that poverty will fall to 16 per cent because of its policies.⁸ CPAG modelling estimates that:

- The Scottish child payment will reduce child poverty by 5 percentage points (at its current rate of £26.70 a week for all children under 16 years old in families claiming universal credit or equivalent).⁹
- A series of other smaller policy interventions including Best Start grant and Best Start foods will reduce child poverty by 1 percentage point.

Evidence from Scotland shows that the targets have played a key role in helping to retain focus on child poverty at a political and policy level. However, more will need to be done to meet the 2030 child poverty target of 10 per cent, and life is still hard for the hundreds of thousands of children growing up in poverty in Scotland. CPAG is a partner on Changing Realities, a participatory online project working with more than 100 parents and carers living on a low income across the UK. Participants share the struggles they face, even with the more generous support available in Scotland.

'Social security support is helpful but even still I really find money is tight and hard to manage finances. Everything is so expensive, I have to ask for additional help with my electricity bill as it runs out so fast. I always worry about my kid's food and clothes and don't really think about myself. I also wish I had money to do more activities with them during the holidays but costs such as tickets and bus fares stop me.'

I receive the Scottish Child Payment which I am very grateful for but I am struggling to get by with high costs. My children get free lunches (as part of Scotland's Universal Free School Meals) [P1-P5] which helps reduce some of my stress about feeding my children during the day. It's good to know they have a warm meal. After summer holidays, I get £100 each for my children's uniform – of course I am really grateful for this but my children are young and growing and this doesn't stretch for their uniforms for the year.'

Nanda, single mother to two young children who works part time

Wales

The Welsh government has control over many key areas, including health, education and local government. However, unlike in Scotland, social security is not devolved. This means that the Welsh government has less power to introduce social security policy interventions that can reduce child poverty. This year, the Welsh government published a child poverty strategy.¹⁰ This is a requirement under the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, whereby Welsh ministers have a duty to set child poverty objectives and to report every three years on progress towards achieving those objectives. The new strategy's objectives are:

- Reducing costs and maximising incomes of families
- Creating pathways out of poverty so that children and young people have opportunities to realise their potential

⁸ See note 6

⁹ The results presented here are based on UKMOD version B1.10. UKMOD is maintained, developed and managed by the Centre for Microsimulation and Policy Analysis (CeMPA) at the University of Essex. The results and their interpretation are the author's sole responsibility.

¹⁰ [Child Poverty Strategy for Wales](#), Welsh government, 2024

- Supporting child and family wellbeing
- Challenging the stigma of poverty
- Ensuring that effective cross-government working at the national level enables strong collaboration at the regional and local level

These are all laudable objectives, however there are some notable design flaws that undermine these ambitions.¹¹ Firstly, there are no targets for child poverty reduction, which are needed to underpin the whole strategy. Recognising some of the current constraints on the Welsh government in terms of devolved powers, even modest targets would help demonstrate it is serious about reducing child poverty, as well as managing expectations about the impact it can have under current constraints.¹²

Secondly, it is not clear how the strategy will translate into tangible actions, and how or when they would be delivered, making it more difficult for the government to be held to account.¹³ It is unclear how the strategy sits in the budgetary process and how it will impact on policymaking at a Welsh government and local level. In the absence of new poverty reduction policies, life is going to remain difficult for nearly a third of children in Wales.

'Social security support available in Wales is extremely limited in my opinion. There is access to free school meals for all primary age children being rolled out across the whole of Wales starting with the youngest learners. The process needs to include all school age children in my opinion. Children don't stop suffering from hunger due to getting older, my 14-year-old son regularly shares his free school meal with his friend whose family don't meet the criteria for free school meals but are struggling financially so their son often has no lunch and is hungry.'

Wales also provides a School Essentials Grant; this is £125 per learner per school year from reception to year 11 this is a new change as previously grants were only for children in year 7, year 9 and a final grant when the child reached year 11. Children going into year 7 now receive £200 due to the increased cost associated with starting secondary school. This is helpful to a degree but due to secondary schools insisting on such specific uniforms with embroidered badges the grant isn't sufficient.

There is also a Discretionary Assistance Fund (DAF) but this isn't widely known about. I have since spoken to someone who applied for a DAF payment who sat within the eligibility criteria but was turned down for their request. It needs to be more widely known about and given to all those who meet the eligibility criteria.'

Kim, 39-year-old mother to four sons living with a disability

Kim's testimony highlights the difficulties that many Welsh families face. While there are some education-based policies such as universal primary free school meals and the school essentials grant, these amounts are small and/or they do not cover all students. The discretionary assistance fund is a welcome lifeline, but it is emergency crisis support for families who are particularly struggling, rather than the more ambitious policy measures that are needed to prevent and reduce poverty at a larger scale. Much more

¹¹ See childcomwales.org.uk/our-work/policy-positions/child-poverty/

¹² While the eradication of child poverty may seem impossible because of the limited policy levers at the Welsh government's disposal, the ministerial foreword makes clear that poverty is a political choice. Similarly, the Children's and Families (Wales) Measure states the Welsh government should set objectives for the contribution towards the eradication of child poverty.

¹³ A measurement framework is being developed, which is better than no measurement framework, but it is concerning that this was not at the centre of the strategy.

will be needed in terms of targeted policies that look to address family income if we are to see a reduction in child poverty in Wales.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, social security powers are formally devolved, although some benefits fall under 'excepted' powers, meaning they effectively remain under Westminster control. Northern Ireland is also required to maintain 'parity' with social security in Britain.

In practice, the social security systems are currently fairly similar, although there are some differences. The most notable difference is a 'mitigation package' of measures in place from 2016 which enables the Northern Ireland Executive to reduce the impact of some Westminster policies such as the benefit cap and bedroom tax through welfare supplementary payments. In addition, there are some differences in UC delivery, largely focusing on payment options.

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires the Executive to 'adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need.' However, since May 2022, there has not been a child poverty strategy in place due to the lack of a devolved government in recent years. There is a commitment to publish an anti-poverty strategy in 2025, with a key focus on children.

The 2016-22 child poverty strategy had two overarching aims of reducing the number of children in poverty and lowering the impact of poverty on children. Although these are laudable aims, there were no poverty reduction targets included in the strategy. The Northern Ireland Audit Office found that there was little sustained progress against most of the poverty indicators.¹⁴ It reported that a key reason for the limited impact of the strategy was the absence of targets. The anti-poverty expert panel recommended that the Northern Ireland Assembly should establish an Anti-Poverty Act, establishing a legal duty to reduce child poverty, including targets and timetables for 2030.¹⁵

The anti-poverty expert panel also found that strategic outcomes were not clearly supported by specific actions, and that it was often difficult to know who was accountable for particular strategic outcomes. They recommend that the child poverty strategy sits at the heart of government so that there is better co-ordination across different departments. They also recommend that contributing departments have properly defined actions, including early intervention and prevention, so they can demonstrate clear links between actions and reducing the scale and impact of poverty. Lastly, they recommended frequent progress reports so that key stakeholders can provide regular independent scrutiny.

These factors mean that child poverty is still rife and social security inadequate in Northern Ireland, as Deirdre's account highlights.

¹⁴ [Child Poverty in Northern Ireland](#), Northern Ireland Audit Office, 2024

¹⁵ [Recommendations for an Anti-Poverty Strategy](#), Expert Advisory Panel, 2020

'The social security support isn't sufficient enough in Northern Ireland, which is a bad thing. More and more people on Universal Credit whether working or not are having to use foodbanks and more and more families are being plummeted into poverty as a result of a system that does not work to sustain families. Families basic needs are not being met. People over here are choosing not to put their heating on during the day whilst their children are in school. Heating is now becoming a luxury instead of something that's essential.

'My children also avail of means tested free school meals. Only 1 meal a day is provided by the education authority that is free and if that's not suitable then you pay a top up fee. My son has additional needs and can only eat certain foods. Before the pandemic the education authority used to cater for children with additional needs but due to severe budget cuts this has now all changed.'

Deirdre, single mother to two children, former teacher

England

The actions of the Westminster government are particularly crucial for determining families' experiences of poverty in England, as there are more limited devolved powers. There are also notable omissions in support for families living in England. Free school meal provision, outside of London, is the most restrictive of anywhere in the UK. England is also the only part of the UK that does not have a national scheme for uniform costs for low-income families.

Since the Child Poverty Act was abolished in 2015, there have been no obligations for local authorities to take action on child poverty, although some areas have taken matters into their own hands. The London Mayor has rolled out universal free school meals to all primary schools in London, and other local authorities, such as Bolton Council, have developed their own anti-poverty strategies.¹⁶ Recently, the newly elected Mayor for the North East of England has established a Child Poverty Reduction Unit, focused on reducing child poverty across the region.¹⁷

Local action to tackle child poverty is commendable and can make a real difference to children and families on a low income, particularly in areas that local authorities have more control over, like housing and childcare. However, it must also be recognised that in the context of large cuts in funding to local authorities and limited control over some of the key policy levers that affect family income, tackling child poverty effectively at a local level can be challenging. Local authorities in England need the back up of an effective UK-wide cross-government child poverty strategy to support these efforts and address some of the key drivers of child poverty in their communities, such as cuts to social security.

¹⁶ For further information see resolvepoverty.org/local-anti-poverty-strategies/

¹⁷ For further information see northeast-ca.gov.uk/news/education-skills-and-inclusion/mayor-takes-first-steps-to-reduce-north-east-s-unacceptable-child-poverty

As Mollie's experience highlights, the financial support offered to families by local authorities in England is often a lifeline, however it doesn't go far enough to avoid the daily struggles that many low-income families face.

'The pandemic shifted for many the way people perceive struggles, but not enough to make a lasting difference. We received the cost of living payment which we were eternally grateful for, but it didn't last very long or go very far – the support we need requires longer term intervention. I hope the future is brighter for my children, and that we can end the cycle of poverty here and now. I don't want my children to struggle the way I have done, as they (and I) deserve so much better. Creating obstacles and further barriers does more damage than good, and at a time where so many are suffering, it only makes sense to close the gap of poverty as much as we can.'

As a low income family, we have been supported with income based Free School Meals and as a result have been able to apply for some summer camps during the school holidays. This has been a real blessing as my daughter has additional needs and can become overwhelmed when her daily routine differs in the breaks at school. The school my children go to has no second hand school uniform for sale, no uniform grants and no subsidies for school trips/outings. There have been times where I have had to turn to our local council to access their Local Welfare Assistance scheme, because when I moved I couldn't afford the cost of the removal van. The council released information regarding the Household Support Fund in recent times, and in the wake of the continuing cost of living crisis, but I found that the funding was only allocated to those facing destitution.'

Mollie, mother to two girls, carer and campaigner

The UK government has committed to further devolution to English regions, and as highlighted above, some of the new Mayors and combined authorities are using their new powers to take action on child poverty. Careful thought will be needed about how the UK-wide strategy can work in conjunction with local areas to deliver action on child policy across a range of policy areas.

Looking forward

Developing a cross-government child poverty strategy for the UK: lessons from the devolved nations

It is clear from the experience in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that an effective UK-wide child poverty strategy needs both targeted policy interventions that address family income and cost pressures faced by families, and the right infrastructure to drive action across government.

Policy interventions

It is evident from this review of child poverty trajectories across the four nations that child poverty only falls when there is significant investment in the social security system. This is particularly important in the context of the past decade, where £50 billion has been taken out of the annual budget of the social security system, disproportionately affecting children and families and driving up child poverty. The first step must be abolishing the two-child limit, to prevent further rises in child poverty over the coming years.

A genuine investment in the social security system (rather than an undoing of problematic policies) would be to increase child benefit by £20 a week. Child benefit is a near universal benefit and would both reduce and prevent poverty, as a benefit that is received by families who may be struggling financially but sit above the threshold for means-tested benefits.

In addition to investing in social security, there are other policy areas that are critical to tackling child poverty in the long term:

- Decent work, pay and progression
- Quality, affordable childcare when families need it
- Inclusive education
- Secure homes for families
- Services and support for children and families

Devolved nations and local authorities are already taking action in these areas, via their own child poverty strategies and other policy initiatives. Going forward, to take effective action across this broad range of policy areas, a mix of policies at both a Westminster and a devolved government / local level will be needed to effectively tackle child poverty in the long term. The forthcoming UK strategy creates a real opportunity to unlock the national policy change that is needed in these different areas, which can then be built upon by decision makers at a devolved and local level.

Infrastructure

As this report outlines, the practical delivery of a child poverty strategy looks different across the four nations, and there are key lessons for the development of a cross-government child poverty strategy at a UK level.

Targets

Having ambitious, measurable targets to work towards is essential for ensuring that a child poverty strategy effectively drives down poverty in families. The targets set out in the Scottish strategy have been a key driver of the Scottish government's decision to invest in the Scottish child payment, for example. Conversely, where a strategy lacks targets, as has been the case in Wales and Northern Ireland, there has been a notable omission of targeted policy interventions to tackle child poverty. Targets must of course reflect the difference that can be made by the tools available at particular levels of government, with the UK government currently having the most responsibility for driving the most significant change.

Reporting

Robust reporting measures are needed to drive action on child poverty across government. In Scotland, independent bodies such as the Poverty and Inequality Commission have been established to monitor the work of government in tackling poverty and inequality. The Commission sits alongside a range of reporting processes that exist at both a central and local government level. In contrast, the lack of reporting mechanisms attached to the child poverty strategy in Northern Ireland has been highlighted as a key factor behind why the strategy failed to deliver a meaningful reduction in child poverty. In Wales, there has been criticism of the lack of robust reporting and accountability mechanisms attached to the strategy.

Leadership

Clear leadership and co-ordination across government is essential for delivering an effective child poverty strategy, particularly if that strategy is cross-government. Both the Scottish strategy and the previous UK strategy (delivered by New Labour) have been driven forward by a child poverty unit at the heart of government, alongside high level political and civil service leadership. The lack of central co-ordination was highlighted as a key reason why the previous Northern Ireland strategy failed to deliver results.

The role of local government

Local government is a key partner that will play a critical role in the delivery of an effective UK-wide strategy. As outlined above, many local areas are taking action through their own child poverty strategy already. The UK-wide strategy should support this existing work by ensuring that any obligations placed

on local authorities are matched with sufficient resources to enable them to invest in initiatives that support children and families living in poverty.

Data

Measuring the tangible impact that a child poverty strategy is having requires robust data at a national, regional and local level. This is particularly important if a strategy is going to focus on reducing poverty for certain groups who are most at risk, including families where someone is disabled, and Black and minority ethnic families. Governments at all levels need to use the data they have to monitor impact, and the UK government needs to look at addressing data gaps where they exist.

Conclusion

There are already record numbers of children living in poverty in the UK, and without further action, child poverty is set to rise even further. However, there are reasons to be hopeful, with commitments to develop and implement child poverty (or anti-poverty) strategies from the UK government, the Welsh government, and the Northern Ireland Executive. In Scotland, the strategy developed by the Scottish government shows that concerted action to reduce child poverty will bear results, with political will.

The next few months and years will be critical, and careful thinking will be needed regarding how a UK-wide child poverty strategy will be delivered across a devolved UK, with plans for further devolution from Westminster on the table. Questions about how a UK-wide strategy will work in conjunction with existing strategies in the devolved nations as yet remain unanswered.

However, some things are clear from the evidence. A UK-wide strategy cannot meaningfully reduce child poverty without investing in the social security system, and this starts with scrapping the two-child limit to avoid further rises in child poverty. It is only once this policy is gone that we can begin to chart a different path for children living in poverty, who deserve a brighter future.

About CPAG, our funders and our sources of evidence

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights.

We have particular expertise in the functioning of the social security system, through our welfare rights, training and policy work. The testimonies in this report come from Changing Realities, a participatory online project working with more than 100 parents and carers living on a low income across the UK, in collaboration with the University of York, the University of Salford and CPAG.

We are grateful for the funding provided by Oxfam GB to write this report.

Child Poverty Action Group is a registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339). cpag.org.uk