

# Tackling child poverty in partnership

**The Child Poverty Act 2010 places an obligation on governments to end child poverty in the UK by 2020. It also places new duties on devolved administrations and local government to tackle child poverty. Dr Julie Nelson examines the extent to which local authorities are meeting the challenge.**



## Background

Research was undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research on behalf of the Local Government Association between late 2010 and March 2011. Via in-depth interviews with 43 child poverty partnership members in nine regional areas, the research team explored how far local authorities were progressing with their requirements to work collaboratively, to complete a local child poverty needs assessment and to develop a joint local child poverty strategy. The research unearthed a high level of local engagement with the new

duty to tackle child poverty, and a number of positive developments. However, these were not without their challenges. Local authorities and their partners identified a number of concerns about their ability to tackle child poverty effectively within the context of worsening economic circumstances and reduced resources.

## Child poverty work has high status

The eradication of child poverty was considered to be a high priority across most participating local partnerships. We found that areas where child poverty had a particularly high status, perhaps not surprisingly, tended to be characterised by high levels of deprivation. Additionally, they often had a high level of strategic understanding and commitment to tackling poverty, and typically had elected member support, with direct involvement of Cabinet representatives in the work of the child poverty partnership. Their child poverty partnership was often governed by or was a sub-group of an existing executive body within the local authority, and child poverty tended to be viewed as a cross-cutting theme across the local authority area.

Although many of our participating local partnerships viewed child poverty as having high status, many interviewees remained concerned about the government's decision not to issue guidance on meeting the targets in the Child Poverty Act to local authorities. Interviewees felt that the lack of statutory guidance demonstrated a lack of government commitment to the eradication of child poverty:

*My fear is that unless organisations are compelled [to work together to tackle child poverty], they will retreat into their own silos and only do their core business.*

*They [government] clearly don't care for the issue... what's measured is what happens... if they don't measure what local authorities are doing, it won't happen.*

Interviewees were concerned that without some level of central prescription, local authorities less committed to child poverty than themselves might fail to prioritise child poverty as a key issue for action. Most partnership members

## Example: a cross-cutting approach to child poverty strategy development

This urban, Labour controlled authority in the English midlands has a child poverty rate in the top quartile nationally. The child poverty partnership is a sub-group of the Children's Trust, and involves a diverse range of partners covering both adult and children's services. It reports to the Children's Trust Board, the Local Strategic Partnership Executive, the Cabinet and the Health Scrutiny Panel, and is therefore centrally and strategically situated within the local authority. Child poverty has been embraced as a 'hub issue', which the partnership lead describes as a useful means of joining up a range of 'apparently unconnected issues', such as youth justice and teenage pregnancy.

The child poverty partnership members with whom we spoke think that this approach has helped to ensure a high level of senior strategic 'buy-in', both from within the local authority, including cross-party commitment from elected members, and from partner organisations.

also predicted that, even in the most proactive local authorities, child poverty would reduce as a priority as local authorities experience spending reductions and have to make 'tough choices' about their priorities. They were particularly anxious about the impact of not having ring-fenced funding for child poverty.

### Local collaboration is well established

Most partnerships were well developed and considered themselves to have the key ingredients for successful collaboration.

- A clear understanding of roles – including identifying the impact of the work on individual partner organisations and how each will benefit from the collaboration.
- A shared commitment to a common goal.
- A focus on outcomes for children and families.
- Good leadership – ideally there needs to be a senior strategic manager who can lead meetings, broker relationships, promote dialogue and give coherence to the inputs of a range of different people. Alternatively, distributed leadership across partnerships can be effective.
- The right mix of people – 'people who can make decisions, influence and inform'. Some members need to be close enough to understand the issues; others need to be senior managers with authority to make things happen.
- Practical factors – including having good lines of communication, holding regular meetings that are 'engaging' in style and content, making good use of people's time and not duplicating work, keeping the membership consistent and having some co-located partnership working.

All participating partnerships had representation from internal local authority services, such as children's services, adult services, social care and health, transport and housing, as well as from public health, Jobcentre Plus, and the voluntary and community sector. The people with whom we spoke generally felt that the right organisations were represented. However, they mentioned that it was difficult to engage local businesses. This was particularly the case where the public sector was a large employer (and where levels of child poverty were relatively high). Generally, children, young people and families had not been involved in strategic planning, although some areas had successfully engaged young people through consultation, or by using materials generated by young people to influence strategic developments.

Given the increasing government focus on work as a route out of family (and consequently child) poverty,<sup>1</sup> the difficulties faced by local authorities in involving the private sector in local child poverty partnership work is a cause of some concern. Additionally, the Act requires local authorities to consult children, the organisations working with or representing them, and parents or the organisations working with or representing them, when developing their strategies. There is still more work to be done in this respect.

### Budget pooling is not yet a reality

In 2011, the government introduced a 'community budgets' pilot, initially in 16 local authorities, empowering them to pool budgets across the public sector. In this context, we asked our local authorities (none of which were taking part in the pilot) and their partners to tell us about their progress in pooling or aligning funds in their own areas. The majority had not yet achieved budget pooling or alignment. As one senior manager acknowledged: 'It is something everyone aspires to, but does not realise.'

A few had made some small progress in this respect, but, according to one interviewee: 'there has been more aligning than pooling ... people have been a little reticent to pool budgets.' The reasons for slow progress in this respect were multiple.

- The timing of moves to pool budgets alongside severe budgetary cuts. One interviewee remarked that budget pooling is dependent on 'having the budgets in the first place'.
- As funding diminishes, organisations tend to be anxious to preserve their own funds. Partners speak of a 'silo mentality', where people are preoccupied with keeping control of their own organisations and concentrating resources on statutory, core functions.

#### Example: the views of children and young people as a starter for strategy development

This predominantly urban, Labour controlled authority in the north of England has a child poverty rate in the second highest quartile nationally. The authority has already completed its child poverty needs assessment (CPNA) and has published its child poverty strategy. We spoke with the local authority health, housing and adult services manager, who explained how the views of children and young people have helped shape the local child poverty strategy in his area.

Initially, the 'leaving care' service helped a number of young people to put together a DVD about the realities of leaving care, and living with economic and social disadvantage. This DVD was shared at a child poverty partnership meeting, just as decisions were about to be made about translating the CPNA into a strategy. The views expressed by the young people were 'taken on board' in the strategy development and the DVD was used as a powerful tool to help launch the strategy. The young people were also consulted about the strategy as it developed through its various drafts.

- Some organisations are not in a position to pool budgets. For example, central government dictates the budget for Jobcentre Plus, and voluntary and community organisations do not have budgets to pool.
- Performance frameworks still tend to be associated with the targets of individual organisations, rather than those that are shared. There needs to be greater freedom in what organisations are held to account for before they can consider pooling funds.

In spite of these challenges, the people to whom we spoke in almost half of the participating partnerships commented that sharing resources was not all about money: it could also entail sharing people or premises. One interviewee called this: 'aligning our resources for the common good'. They also mentioned the need to focus on outcomes and effectively target resources at key people, key families and key neighbourhoods. In these respects, there is clear evidence of good practice.

### Identifying needs and strategy development is well underway

Although most participating partnerships had already completed their child poverty needs assessment (CPNA), they had experienced three particular challenges in doing so. First, publically available data was reported often to be out of date by the time they were able to access it. Second, while it is possible to acquire data at the district or ward level, it can reportedly be very difficult to 'drill down' at the locality, or super-output level. This means that it can be difficult to identify the neighbourhoods or specific families most in need of targeted support. This, in turn, affects effective strategy development. Finally, different authorities and agencies often find it difficult to share, or are even prohibited from sharing, named personal data, have very different systems for the collection of data that do not always 'talk to each other' and, in some instances, are reticent about sharing data with partners.

Strategies for tackling these issues include: making the local strategic partnership the home of the child poverty partnership to facilitate sharing data between adult and children's services; using qualitative data to supplement quantitative super-output level data that is often difficult to access or share; and ensuring that the Data Protection Act is not being misused or misunderstood by partners when there are problems with data sharing. Although the issue of time lag in the supply of nationally available

data was commonly mentioned, one of our partnerships was involved in a pilot study that was helping to overcome this issue.

Participating partnerships had generally made a relatively smooth transition from CPNA to strategy. The following factors had helped partnerships in their strategy development and forward planning:

- the same people being involved at both CPNA and strategy development stage;
- ensuring the CPNA was viewed as a forerunner to the strategy;
- making links between needs in the CPNA and actions in implementation plans;
- ensuring that both documents were kept 'live' and under review – being revised in line with changing national or local priorities.

Although most partnerships were well on track for completing their strategies, few had yet to take the next step – making the transition from strategy to action.

### Moving from strategy to action

Almost all participating partnerships were passionate in their desire to make their child poverty strategies work and to make a difference to the lives of local families and children. However, in many cases they had deep concerns about the reality of achieving this goal:

- budget reductions and resultant service cuts;
- the broader economic climate and fears that this would impact hard on families already struggling to support themselves;
- the enormity of the task of tackling structural inequality and, in some cases, inter-generational cycles of worklessness and benefit dependency.

However, there was also an air of realism. Many of the people with whom we spoke believed that partnerships could make a difference if they focused on direct intervention with families, rather than on macro-economic issues. Most partnerships were planning to tackle poverty, initially in small and manageable ways, by focusing on specific localities, families or groups – with an initial focus on prevention and mitigation rather than cure. Most partnerships were using a range of pre-existing interventions based on the four objectives of reducing worklessness, improving financial literacy, improving health, and giving children the best start in life.

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## Recommendations for future action

Our research prompts three key questions that can help to ensure that local child poverty strategies are effectively implemented.

### 1. How can the status of child poverty be kept high amidst concerns about budget reductions?

At a central policy level, government needs to do all it can to assuage the concerns of local partnerships via ‘morale boosting’ statements about the importance of child poverty work; concrete examples of how the ‘big society’ will take forward the work effectively; and assurances that central funding will remain in place through direct grants to local authorities. At a local policy level, local authorities can benefit from guidance about how to ‘position’ their partnerships strategically in order to maximise their impact. Suggestions include: sharing analyses and strategy documents with elected members; encouraging elected members or senior executive-level staff to chair partnership meetings; ensuring that the child poverty lead has strong leadership qualities and influence across the whole area; and drawing senior staff from across the local authority and other agencies into the partnership.

### 2. How can local authorities and their partners develop firm, collaborative partnerships that can assess local need effectively and develop robust child poverty strategies?

At a policy level, local partnerships need guidance on specific issues such as: budget pooling and alignment; evidence of ‘what works’ in tackling child poverty through business cases and value-for-money examples; ways to attract the private sector; and strategies for encouraging inward investment into disadvantaged areas. At a practice level, local authorities need to ensure that certain ingredients are in place in order to nurture firm, collaborative partnerships: exceptional leadership, ideally from someone with a cross-authority function; a clear statement of the roles and responsibilities of the different partners and organisations; a shared commitment to tangible, mutually agreed outcomes for children and families; the right mix of people, including senior strategists and operational managers (both those who do, and do not, usually work with children); and close working with the voluntary and community sector. Local authorities that have been able to involve elected members or executive-level staff in their partnerships generally report that child poverty has high profile in their local areas.

### Example: partnership involved in a data sharing project

This local authority’s CPNA is complete. However, the people to whom we spoke in the Children’s Trust, public health, the chief executive’s office, the private sector and the voluntary and community sector, explained that they had faced challenges in the process. Their authority is predominantly urban, in the north of England, and with a child poverty rate in the highest quartile nationally.

Like most other case study areas, this authority has faced difficulties in accessing timely and relevant national-level data related to a range of child poverty indicators, such as health statistics and rates of lone parenting. However, the authority is involved in a data sharing project with the Department for Work and Pensions. This means that the child poverty partnership receives key employment data – specifically statistics on worklessness within its authority and local output area. The data is broken down by a range of characteristics, such as the gender of those who are out of work, and is also updated on a quarterly basis.

The pilot has been highly successful. The people with whom we spoke said that it provides them with the ‘real time’ data that they need to track local rates of employment and worklessness, to investigate the emerging patterns, and to build a CPNA and child poverty strategy that is based on the intelligence.

### 3. How can local authorities and their partners succeed in driving forward work to tackle child poverty in their local areas?

At a policy level, local authorities and their partners need a number of ‘tools’ in order to progress, including: some level of central ‘prescription’, even if only at the level of minimum expected standards or statutory monitoring of progress; accurate and timely national and local-level prevalence data; clear guidance on data protection legislation; advice on developing the CPNA into a strategy; and on moving from strategy to implementation.

Finally, at a practice level, local authorities and their partners need to be realistic in their child poverty outcome goals, but recognise that there is much that they can do to mitigate the effects of poverty. Suggestions include: keeping interventions specific, family-focused and manageable; ‘child poverty-proofing’ all local authority strategic plans; self-monitoring and evaluation; and sharing of good practice locally and regionally. ■

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The full report on which this article is based is J Nelson, L O’Donnell and C Filmer-Sanke, *Local Authority Progress in Tackling Child Poverty*, National Foundation for Educational Research, 2011, and is available to download from [www.nfer.ac.uk/publications](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications)

<sup>1</sup> HM Government, *A New Approach to Child Poverty: tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families’ lives*, Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Education, 2011