

Keeping child poverty on the agenda

We start the year with all the headlines and most of the political oxygen being taken up by Brexit, which everyone is agreed is likely to drive up the cost of essentials, piling more misery on top of years of austerity for people managing on a low income. What is also clear is that the preoccupation with Brexit has squeezed many other issues not only out of the news, but off the political agenda, with promised plans and legislation across a variety of departments kicked into the long grass.

The features in this issue speak to the scale of the poverty challenge, which would surely be headline news in any other circumstance. Gwyther Rees presents new analysis of how experiences of poverty affect the wellbeing of 14-year-olds – worth bearing in mind at a time when the media likes to attribute any malaise among teenagers to the influence of social media. Jonathan Bradshaw and Antonia Keung show that the depth of poverty among families with children in the UK is continuing to rise against a variety of measures. And Ciara Fitzpatrick, Kate McCauley and Kevin Higgins sound a note of warning about the impending expiry of Northern Ireland’s mitigations package (which protects residents from some of the harshest cuts, such as the ‘bedroom tax’ and benefit cap) and call for a renewed package which also addresses the hardship caused by the transition to universal credit, gaps in housing support and the ‘two-child limit’.

However, in this difficult context it is encouraging that rising levels of poverty have not gone unnoticed by the public. According to Ipsos MORI’s monthly polling, poverty and inequality are now seen as the third most important issue facing Britain, with more than one in five members of the public saying it is the single most pressing issue – more than at any time since 1997. The British Social Attitudes Survey also shows increasing support for higher levels of taxation and social spending, starting to reverse a previous downward trend. Radical action to tackle poverty could have considerable public support.

We also start this year with a new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions – the sixth in less than three years – and a number of announcements on universal credit which may signal a positive shift in approach. How big a shift remains to be seen, but it is undoubtedly positive that Amber Rudd took swift action to scrap plans to apply the two-child limit to children born before the policy was introduced in April 2017 and has announced plans to pilot more frequent payments and improve the reporting system for childcare costs (which is currently labyrinthine).

We go to press, however, with the results of the DWP’s annual survey of claimant satisfaction hot off the press. These show that universal credit has the lowest level of satisfaction of any DWP benefit, and raise serious concerns about the level of service available to claimants, especially over the phone. One figure in particular, which should give the new Secretary of State pause for thought as she oversees further roll-out, is that just 85 per cent of universal credit claimants have internet access at home. The figure is even lower for claimants of other benefits, suggesting that significant numbers will find the transition challenging as they are required to move across in the coming years. Social security ought to go with the grain of people’s lives, not against it. ■

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Poverty is the policy journal of the Child Poverty Action Group. It aims to carry articles and features that will inform, stimulate and develop the debate on the nature and causes of poverty in its various forms and on the action required, especially by governments, to relieve and ultimately prevent it. Our objective is to publish material that achieves a high standard of analysis, without sacrificing clarity or accessibility, to specialist and non-specialist alike.

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