

Child poverty strategy consultation – RMBC draft response

1. To what extent do you agree that the draft strategy achieves a good balance between tackling poverty now and tackling the drivers of intergenerational poverty?
 - The strategy seems to strike a good balance, but is undermined by a lack of clarity on how progress will be measured (see comment under 6 below).
2. Considering the current fiscal climate, what is your view of the actions set out in the draft strategy?
 - The strategy's coverage of welfare is unbalanced. The reform programme is seen almost as a panacea, with no acknowledgement of the projected increases in poverty caused by measures such as the Welfare Benefits Up-rating Act. Benefits are fundamental in tackling child poverty now and their erosion – or temporary removal via DWP sanctions - can leave people reliant on local charities (e.g. food banks) for essentials such as food and heating. Furthermore, the withdrawal of government funding for local welfare provision schemes threatens to remove a much needed safety net.
 - Universal credit, in particular, is seen as critical for improving work incentives, but it seems unlikely to be implemented (at least not in full) within the lifetime of the strategy. In addition, the strategy doesn't address the social mobility and child poverty commission's recommendations on universal credit, for example ensuring that all families – and not just those in which all parents are working and paying income tax – get support with 85% of childcare costs.
 - All references to troubled families are in relation to helping families into work; whilst this is a key outcome of the troubled families programme it is also proving the hardest to achieve. In order to support families who are furthest from the workplace into jobs there needs to be closer working between local partnerships (e.g. health and wellbeing boards) and DWP. There has been recognition of this through the troubled families work and proposals to shift the role of Jobcentre Plus advisers to be 'coaches', though this is sometimes in conflict with the agenda to limit welfare spending and implement a more punitive benefits regime (i.e. increased use of sanctions). For instance, our ongoing scrutiny review of DWP sanctions in Rotherham has heard evidence that sanctions can often put additional stress on individuals and families and make it harder for them to find work.
 - Good practice from the troubled families programme in terms of what works in encouraging families to change could be implemented to a greater extent across government - and in particular within DWP - to embed a family intervention culture in all departments where there is a direct link with families.
 - Could Government introduce regulations to ensure that, as part of the reporting regime for use of pupil premium, schools must show how they will

use/have used the funding to support priorities identified in the local child poverty strategy?

- Implementing changes to career advice in schools would be very effective. Schools need to be held to account for the destinations of school leavers alongside academic achievements. Schools and careers leads in schools also need to have a good understanding of the local labour market.
- Adult apprenticeships – it should be recognised that the relative low pay received by apprentices means that the short term impact on child poverty will be low. Our experience is that apprenticeship opportunities are available locally, but due to salary levels they are often not attractive to people seeking work or looking to improve their position in the labour market.
- There is a concern that mental health is only recognised as a barrier once it has become a 'mental health illness', but low self-esteem and related mental health issues are often major barriers to employment and can therefore contribute significantly to child poverty.
- There is a welcome focus on low pay, in line with the social mobility and child poverty commission's recommendations, which is particularly relevant for Rotherham where average pay is well below the national average, particularly for women. However, proposed action to properly enforce the minimum wage does not go far enough. The government should consider implementing recommendations from the Resolution Foundation's recently concluded review of the national minimum wage (NMW) including making it an explicit long-term ambition of economic policy to reduce the incidence of low pay.

3. At a local level, what works well in tackling child poverty now?

- Whilst we aspire to move beyond a crisis approach, a significant amount of time and resource is focused on mitigating the impact of welfare cuts and helping those who are struggling to make ends meet. Our aim though is to help build people's capability and confidence and give them the knowledge and skills to overcome challenges and escape poverty.
- Recognising debt and financial capability as a particular problem, we are working closely with a local credit union, helping to promote their services and build their capacity and membership, in part by working with them on delivery of our local welfare provision scheme.
- Tackling barriers to employment is also critical, though the council and our local partners can only have a limited impact on employability given that the primary vehicle for welfare to work is DWP's Work Programme. The continuing significant underperformance for ESA claimants on the Work Programme suggests that an alternative approach is needed; ideally with more devolution to local areas who are best placed to join up employment support with other community or family based initiatives.

4. At a local level, what works well for preventing poor children becoming poor adults?

- A focus on early intervention and prevention is critical, but it is obviously difficult to identify what works well when the impact will only be felt in the long-term. The challenging financial climate and pressure to make immediate savings can also militate against investment in often resource intensive preventative approaches.

5. What more can central government do to help employers, local agencies and the voluntary and community sector work together to end child poverty?

- There is a lot of work to be done with businesses to encourage them to offer flexible working practices. As noted above, government could also do more in relation to the national minimum wage and to encourage adoption of the living wage, focusing not only on legal or moral imperatives, but also the benefits to business in terms of happier, healthier more motivated employees, reduced sickness absence etc.

6. Additional comments

- Despite last year's consultation on better measures of child poverty, new performance measures have not been identified. Instead there is a continued commitment to ending child poverty by 2020, in line with the targets in the Child Poverty Act, which seems unrealistic. The social mobility and child poverty commission's call, in "State of the nation", for a "detailed step-by-step plan for how [government] will meet the 2020 targets" has not been heeded.
- This lack of detail adds to the impression of a piecemeal approach, with the document reading as a list of – often laudable and relevant - objectives and initiatives rather than a coherent, deliverable strategy.