Response on behalf of Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership

Introduction
The Scottish Parliament’s Social Security Committee is seeking views on the general principles of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill. The response from Aberdeenshire Community Planning Partnership to the issues being consulted on is as follows:

1. Whether you agree that statutory child poverty targets should be re-introduced for Scotland?

1.1 The partnership support the re-introduction of statutory child poverty targets for Scotland. Ensuring that children have the best start in life and in their early years provides a good foundation for improved health, wellbeing and life chances later in life. There needs to be equity of opportunities for children & young people before child poverty becomes something of the past.

1.2 Partners welcome the Scottish Government’s desire to see child poverty as a cross-cutting issue in terms of policy. If the proposed statutory targets are to be achieved it would seem appropriate that the ambition to eradicate child poverty is shared by Scottish Government and a range of other agencies. Streamline the duties, targets and reporting structures ensuring outcomes are improved holistically. Child poverty is a complex issue which requires an integrated approach with other policy areas. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill will ensure that the eradication of child poverty receives greater attention from a range of partners than the child poverty Strategy for Scotland 2014-17 was able to achieve.

2. The appropriateness and scope of the 4 proposed targets.

2.1 Scottish Government’s focus on income based targets is welcome. Statutory targets are useful to ensure a continued focus and commitment to improvement however the targets and duties required need to be dovetailed into existing reporting structures and targets or they could become ineffective.

The proposed targets are ambitious, particularly since Scottish Government does not have all of the powers required to achieve these targets. However, a concerted effort at national and local level over the timeframe to 2030 will provide an opportunity to achieve these targets.

2.2 The proposed child poverty measure of income combining both 60% median equivalised income and material deprivation were developed following extensive consultation and has a strong evidence base. The 60% median equivalised income measure has been effective in capturing the effects of complex economic situations and is also the official child poverty measure of other governments, the EU, OECD and UNICEF. Relative income thresholds are widely used internationally and will allow international comparison.

2.3 However it is also acknowledged that there is currently little reliable data on the number of households in Scotland living in Persistent Poverty as defined in the Bill.

2.4 Income thresholds can provide a simple-to-understand and consistent time series of the number of people living in poverty. One area that income-based approaches struggle to adequately capture is ‘cash in hand’ income and how income of this type varies over time, particularly in times of recession.

2.5 It is also welcome that Scottish Government recognise that legislation alone will not deliver the change required.
3. Whether interim targets are needed

3.1 Scottish Government’s proposed child poverty targets are to be achieved by 2030. The longer term nature of these targets suggest that interim targets would be helpful in terms of accountability, helping to maintain momentum and in the assessment of progress. At a local level interim targets would also assist in focusing local delivery plans.

3.2 Interim targets aligned to the endpoint of the timeframe of the proposed delivery plans (31 March 2021 and 31 March 2026) may be a practical solution worth consideration.

4. The proposed arrangements for reporting progress towards meeting the targets and how best to hold the Scottish Government to account

4.1 The requirement for Scottish Ministers to prepare periodic delivery plans and a timeframe for the delivery of each plan is welcomed as is the proposed requirement for Scottish Ministers to consult with a range of key stakeholders. Streamline the duties, targets and reporting structures ensuring outcomes are improved holistically.

4.2 While proposed annual progress reports will be helpful it is recognised that within a 12 month period progress towards achieving the child poverty targets may be limited. Therefore in addition to annual progress reports a more detailed report and assessment of progress for the proposed delivery plan timeframes ending 31 March 2021 and 31 March 2026 is likely to be even more helpful and may help in identify key issues which are providing difficult to address effectively within the anticipated timeframe.

4.3 While the general reporting principal articulated in the Bill is welcome, it will help to focus local delivery efforts and will require Local Authorities and NHS Boards to closely collaborate in order to deliver effective action at a local level, it also represents a missed opportunity to ensure reporting of the fullest possible range of contributions at a local level, including those undertaken by third sector partners, private enterprise and by communities themselves which could have been achieved by requiring Community Planning Partnerships to publish annually a joint local child poverty action report. The local strategies should give the areas a focus and reporting on the improved outcomes will enable areas to share good practice. The plans should integrated education, health, employment, financial inclusion and economic development.

5. The responsibility placed on local councils and health boards to make local progress reports

5.1 Joint reporting on local actions being taken to contribute to meeting the targets is welcomed and the proposed responsibility on Local Authorities and NHS Boards will require close collaboration between these bodies. However, there is a risk that some important action at a local level by the full range of community planning partners, including third sector partners and also by communities themselves may not be fully captured. CPPs would have been ideally placed to lead on the development and delivery of local child poverty delivery plans encompassing contributions from a range of community planning partners including Local Authorities, NHS Boards, Health & Social Care Partnerships and third sector partners. CPPs can ensure that action related to health improvement, employability, housing, educational attainment, economic development, financial inclusion etc is taken forward in an integrated way at a local level.
6. The existing Child Poverty Measurement Framework and its 37 indicators

6.1 The proposed Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill provides an opportunity to revisit the child poverty Measurement Framework and consider if these are the best indicators of child poverty. The link between some of the proposed indicators and child poverty is weak and some of the required action inferred by the proposed measures is unlikely to have an impact on child poverty. The frequency with which data for some of the proposed measures is collected and reported also makes some of the indicators of limited value. The provision of a narrative alongside the proposed measures explaining the link between the measure and how it is anticipated it will contribute to the eradication of child poverty would be helpful.

6.2 The indicators in the existing Measurement Framework do not adequately reflect health and wellbeing measures. There are a number of health and wellbeing measures that are better proxies for child poverty than many of the indicators selected, e.g. childhood obesity at P1, dental disease at P1 and P7, smoking in pregnancy; child and adolescent mental health and barriers to parental employment such as disability or living with a long-term condition. These indicators would provide a better insight into how child poverty adversely impacts on health and wellbeing, or how the material circumstances of parents can adversely impact on the health and wellbeing of children.

6.3 Measures relating to the provision of free school meals; early years attainment; employment rates of lone parents; fuel poverty and the uptake of fuel advice; uptake of key welfare benefits sand uptake of Child Tax Credits, uptake of grants from the Scottish Welfare Fund and uptake of debt advice in Scotland would also be worth considering.

6.4 The Pockets, Prospects and Places structure of the Measurement Framework is helpful but consideration of how the proposed indicators align to and reflect key SIMD domains such as; Income, Employment, Health, Education, Skills & Training, Geographic Access to Services, Crime and Housing and the indicators within each domain is also required.

6.5 Scottish Government wish to ensure that child poverty is a cross-cutting issue in terms of policy therefore it is also vital that the proposed indicators in the Measurement Framework fully reflect Scottish Government ambitions in key policy areas such as; GIRFEC, economic growth, promoting fair pay for all, increasing childcare, educational attainment, skills and training and supporting people into employment. Further work is required to integrate the proposed framework with the existing Children’s Service requirements under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.

6.6 There is also a need to balance the harder measures/indicators highlighted with qualitative data, which provides an insight into the lived experience of child poverty. For example, the 'Learning Lessons' research on young people’s views on poverty and education in Scotland and ‘The Cost of the School Day’ report are good examples of the richness of qualitative data and how this evidence can be used effectively, alongside harder measures, to monitor progress in achieving key targets.
7. Although not in this Bill, the Scottish Government has committed to establishing a national poverty and inequality commission. What should this commission’s status and powers be in relation to this Bill?

7.1 The development of a ‘Commission’ has the potential to bring partners together to share learning and best practice, as well as to explore national and international evidence regarding child poverty interventions. The commission requires representation from all sectors and community types. A higher profile of the group and its work will increase feedback from those working in this sector as well as those affected by living in poverty. The Commission could have a formal role in the monitoring of progress.

8. Any other issues you think are relevant to this Bill.

8.1 It will not be possible to mitigate, alleviate or eradicate child poverty by focusing on children only. Improving maternal health and well-being and improving education, and skill development opportunities and employment rates of parents in low income households, particularly lone mothers, will be key if child poverty in Scotland is to be eradicated.

8.2 The development of a child poverty Logic Model for Scotland may help to articulate the action required at different levels.

8.3 Greater use by the Scottish Government of current legislative powers (such as benefits top up) could help to mitigate the current increases in figures resultant from the impact of welfare reforms.

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