Barnardo’s Scotland Stage 1 written evidence: Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill

Barnardo’s is the UK’s largest children’s charity, Barnardo’s Scotland works with more than 26,500 children and young people in over 122 specialised services. Our services work with families and children who are living in poverty and facing multiple disadvantages. Depending on their circumstances the children and young people we work with will have different challenges. For some, this may be that they have been in care or, for others, that they are affected by a parent or carers drug or alcohol misuse. In general low income is the one common factor for the families that we work with.

The need for statutory child poverty targets, their appropriateness and scope

We are very supportive of the reintroduction of statutory targets that are based on a measurement of income.

As we have noted above, low income is the most common issue affecting the children, young people and families we work with. As such it is important that targets to measure progress on eradicating child poverty are based on income. We also welcome the fact that the targets are based on consideration of income after housing costs. For many of the families we work with this is an important issue as the cost of everyday goods such as food, energy and clothing are increasing. Our services have also told us that the freeze on working age benefits and changes to child tax credits have had a significant impact on household income and the ability to live day to day.

Interim Targets

Whilst we fully support the four targets contained in sections 2 – 5 of the Bill we do believe that there is a need for progress to be measured along the way to 2030. We would be supportive of interim targets being included on the face of the Bill. It is important to be clear about the purpose of such targets and as such it is
useful to consider two previous pieces of legislation. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 set a target to eradicate fuel poverty by 2016 so far as reasonable practicable. There were no interim targets set and although there was an annual fuel poverty statement there was no requirement to meet any milestones over a 15 year period. The result of this was that over that period there was arguably a lack of focus on the target and a weakening of accountability with a target that seemed remote. In contrast to this the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 contains annual targets, an interim target and a final target. We believe that consideration should be given on whether this is a model that could be applied to the Bill.

In terms of an interim target there is merit in looking at a requirement on Scottish Ministers to be ‘halfway’ towards eradicating child poverty by 2024 (‘halfway’ towards the target year of 2030).

Again, interim targets would allow public and political scrutiny and provide a useful way of measuring progress towards the 2030 goals.

**Delivery Plans**

We welcome the duty on Scottish Ministers to prepare annual delivery plans. What is important is that the contents of the delivery plans described in section seven are linked directly to achievement of the proposed child poverty targets. This will ensure there is a direct link between what is contained in the delivery plan and how this relates to making progress towards the target.

To assist this it would be helpful if the Bill includes a list of policy areas that Ministers are required to set out in the delivery plans. This could include:

- the full use of Scottish social security powers
- the provision of information, advice and assistance to parents and carers in relation to welfare rights and income maximisation
- the provision of suitable and affordable housing
- the availability of childcare
- the facilitation of employment for parents and carers

The Scottish Government would then be obliged to set out in its delivery plan how action in each of the areas will contribute to the eradication of child poverty.

A similar provision was contained within the Child Poverty Act 2010 (before its amendment by the Welfare Reform Act 2016) which set
out building blocks that were to be reflected in the UK Government’s Child Poverty strategies.

**Duty on Local Authorities and Health Boards**

We welcome the fact that section 10 of the Bill contains a duty on Local Authorities and Health Boards to report on what action they have taken in the last year for the purpose of contributing to the achievement of the child poverty targets. ‘Local Child Poverty Action Reports’ should be a useful contribution to scrutiny of the actions to tackle child poverty at a local level as well as acting as a way of disseminating and sharing good practice.

Barnardo’s Scotland works in a majority of Local Authority areas in Scotland. It is our experience that there is a significant commitment to tackling poverty across the country with many effective local initiatives delivered by statutory and third sector organisations. There is however an issue that strategic planning at the local level is somewhat inconsistent. For example Part 3 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 requires that Local Authorities and Health Boards must produce a Children’s Services Plan by April 2017. The guidance of part 3 of the Act is helpful but only asks that Local Authorities and Health Boards ensure that:

“Relevant national outcomes and objectives are reflected in the Children’s Services Plan. This includes the national commitment to reducing child poverty. The Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland provides a detailed outcomes framework to start to tackle the underlying causes of poverty, and a set of specific indicators with which to measure progress”. ¹

There is no requirement that this should be done but it is “recommended” that both outcomes and indicators are reflected in the Children’s Services Plan.

As such we are concerned that section 10 is insufficient in that it is retrospective, requiring Local Authorities to describe what they have done rather than plan for future actions. We believe the key to meeting the 2030 target will be how local activity to tackle child poverty is linked to the actions that Scottish Ministers will take. A concerted national and local approach is vital. As such the legislation should ensure there is a clear duty on Local Authorities and Health Boards to take a strategic approach to reducing child poverty in their area – as well as reporting annually on the steps they have taken to achieve this.

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There are a range of planning and legislative options that could be explored including Children’s Services Planning and Local Outcome Improvement Planning.

Alongside this duty we believe the Scottish Government should allocate some form of dedicated resource to Local Authorities in order to build capacity, promote good practice and co-ordinate efforts across the wide range of local authority services as well as community planning partners.

**The Measurement Framework**

In addition to the four high level targets contained within the Bill (sections 2-5), there is a need for the Bill to make provision for the development of an underlying ‘measurement framework’ to allow for progress towards those goals to be assessed.

Such a framework would provide a means of assessing the extent to which local and national government are taking the requisite steps required to achieve the targets. It could measure, for example, the proportion of households taking up the benefits to which they are entitled, rates of maternal employment and uptake of free child care hours. As well as helping to identify policy areas where progress has stalled, such a framework would allow for improvements and progress to be demonstrated even where external forces were causing rates of child poverty to stagnate or increase. While the Scottish Government have already indicated their commitment to produce such a measurement framework, ECP members believe it would be useful for the current legislation to set out the key areas to be covered by the framework. As with the Delivery Plans, these might include:

- the facilitation of employment for parents and carers
- the provision of information, advice and assistance to parents and carers in relation to welfare rights and income maximisation
- the provision of suitable and affordable housing
- the availability of childcare

**Independent Scrutiny**

Barnardo’s Scotland believe there is a need for an independent body – established in statute - to perform some of the roles previously fulfilled by the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission at UK level. Under the Child Poverty Act 2010, the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission was charged – amongst other things - with a duty to publish an annual report setting out its views on the progress made towards the income targets. The performance of
these functions – by a body whose role and independence are established and protected in statute – could be extremely important in ensuring that there is an expert source of independent scrutiny and oversight. The body’s legislative underpinning would ensure that it could speak freely and be critical of the government where necessary.

A Commission could also have a role in target setting.

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