Key Points

- Children 1st are seeing an increase in the number of children we support whose lives are blighted by poverty. Scotland is one of the richest countries in the world, yet we are seeing families across the country being forced to make desperate choices, for example between heating and eating.

- Whilst legislation will not in itself end child poverty, introducing statutory child poverty targets, based on income, will keep the focus of Government and public services on poverty reduction and provide a mechanism to measure progress and hold this and future Scottish Governments to account.

- Children 1st, alongside other members of the End Child Poverty coalition, believe there is a need for the legislation to include interim targets to ensure Government is on track towards its final goals.

- Given the wide variation in terms of political commitment and the quality of existing strategic approaches to poverty reduction at local authority and health board level, Children 1st believe the legislation should include a clear duty on local authorities and health boards to develop a strategic plan to reduce child poverty in their area, in addition to the annual reporting duty, currently proposed.

- Reviewing and updating the child poverty framework would ensure a consistent approach in preparation for the development of the National Child Poverty Delivery Plan. The voices of children and families with lived experiences of poverty should inform this process, in line with the recommendations of the Christie Commission and the principles of the Community Empowerment Act.

- Families living in, or at risk of poverty, need urgent support now. By making brave and immediate use of the social security powers coming to Scotland, to top up child benefit, the Scottish Government can begin to make rapid advances to achieving the ambition of eradicating child poverty enshrined in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill.

Questions

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

1. Yes. Statutory child poverty targets, based on income, will keep the Scottish Government and public services focused on eradicating one of the biggest issues that blights the lives of children in Scotland today. Between 2013-14 and 2015-2016 Children 1st, Scotland’s national children’s charity, have seen a 7% increase in the number of individuals we support experiencing financial hardship. For the children we support growing up in poverty means feeling cold, going hungry and being unable to fully join in activities at school, with friends or in the wider community. Child poverty not only blights children’s childhoods, it is likely to result in poorer financial prospects, health and wellbeing throughout the course of their lifetime. Latest figures show that the number of children living in poverty in Scotland has increased from 22% (220,000) to 26% (260,000) in the past year. Only by reducing income inequality and maximising the financial resources available to families in Scotland can real and lasting progress be made towards eradicating child poverty.
The appropriateness and scope of the 4 proposed targets
2. Children 1st strongly support the use of the four targets described in the Bill and the fact that they are all income based measures. International comparisons suggest that the levels at which the 2030 targets are set are both realistic and achievable. While we recognise the need to set an attainable target to reduce poverty, it should become unacceptable for any child’s health, wellbeing and future life changes to be blighted by poverty. In the drive to meet the targets the Scottish Government and its partners must not be detracted from the broader ambition of preventing future generations from growing up in poverty.

Whether interim targets are needed,
3. Including interim targets within the legislation provide a clear means of measuring ongoing progress towards the final 2030 target. The experiences of children born into poverty today, will have significantly impacted on their health, educational attainment, skills development and ability to participate in their local community by the time they reach the age of 13 in 2030. While detailed projections and calculations will be required to work out what realistic interim targets might look like; setting these out in legislation, along the model of the Climate Change Scotland Act, will enable ongoing public and political scrutiny and provide a useful way of measuring progress toward the 2030 goals. Interim targets will also help ensure that we begin making a difference for those children and families experiencing poverty now.

The proposed arrangements for reporting progress towards meeting the targets and how best to hold the Scottish Government to account
4. From Children 1st’s experience of supporting children and families living in poverty, we know the families are trapped in poverty by an extremely complex set of intersecting circumstances including debt, benefit sanctions, housing costs, insecure employment and transport. Housing issues have become a growing issue; many of the families our Tackling Money Worries project support in Glasgow are experiencing issues with affordability, housing quality, overcrowding and location. Yet only half of the public service providers responding to the 2012 Local action to tackle child poverty in Scotland report identified housing as a department that had explicit and direct responsibility for tackling child poverty in their area. We therefore share the view of the End Child Poverty (ECP) coalition, of which we are members, that there needs to be a more prescriptive approach to identifying the policy areas that must be covered in Delivery Plans. The Scottish Government has a range of major financial and policy tools at its disposal to achieve the ambition set out in this legislation. As a minimum these policy areas should include social security, taxation, employment, childcare and housing policy. 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.

5. There should be a clear link between the legislation, content of Delivery plans and a revised Poverty Measurement Framework; developed in partnership with children and families with lived experience of poverty, as described below. In addition to interim targets against the child poverty measures established by the legislation, supplementary interim targets relating to the poverty measurement framework indicators would provide a further means of assessing progress.

6. Delivery plans need to be adequately resourced, with resources set aside at each spending review between now and 2030.
The responsibility placed on local councils and health boards to make local progress reports

7. Given the crucial impact that statutory and discretionary services provided by local government, community planning partners and other groups working in the community have on child poverty, Children 1st welcome the incorporation of local authorities and health boards in the legislative framework, but believe that this must include a duty on local authorities and health boards to develop strategic plans to reduce child poverty, as well as to report on their activities, if this is to make a meaningful difference to the experience of children and families across Scotland.

8. While good work is already being done to address child poverty at a local level, the 2012 *Local action to tackle child poverty in Scotland* report provided evidence of wide variation in terms of political commitment and the quality of existing strategic approaches to poverty reduction. Introducing a requirement on local authorities and health boards to take a strategic approach to address child poverty within the legislative framework will ensure greater consistency and accountability across all parts of Scotland.

The existing Child Poverty Measurement Framework and its 37 indicators,

9. Given the development of the Child Poverty Bill including the commitment to produce a child poverty delivery plan, it appears timely to revise the poverty measurement framework to ensure a consistent approach.

10. Some of the measures in the existing framework do not fully reflect the barriers to lifting children out of poverty that families in Scotland face today. For example, while the framework includes measures about the number of parents in employment, in 2014/15, 66% of children in poverty were living in households with at least one adult in employment [xi], confirming that employment is by no means a guaranteed route out of poverty. The impact of insecure employment, such as zero hour contracts are one of the principal causes of poverty. Given the recognition within the Child Poverty Bill consultation that insecure employment means families: “will dip in and out of poverty over an extended period” it would be helpful to recognise this within the child poverty measurement framework.

11. If Scotland is serious about delivering services in partnership with service users, in line with the Christie Commission report and the ambition of the Community Empowerment Act, the voices of children and families with lived experiences of poverty, must also inform changes to the child poverty measurement framework. For example, the current measurement that 71% in the most deprived areas are satisfied with the condition of their home, ignores the experience of families living in poverty in areas of relative affluence. Edinburgh is an affluent capital city, but every single ward registers child poverty rates of over 10% after housing costs. And while families may not feel satisfied with the condition of their home, they may feel unable to report the need for repairs to their landlord for various reasons. Among the families we work with we are aware of examples of families feeling unable to contact their landlord to ask for their rights, for example to multiple housing repairs, to be met, due to historic rent arrears.

12. Across a broader range of measurements, for example satisfaction with local schools, we are aware that the stigma of poverty or lack of social and cultural capital may prevent families living in poverty from asserting their rights. Genuine participation of families experiencing or who have experienced poverty will help ensure that measurements reflect and track real change in the experience and impact of child poverty in Scotland over time.

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?
13. As an ECP member we believe there is a need for an independent body 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.

14. As described above those with the greatest expertise about what makes a real difference to children living in poverty, are the one in five children in Scotland who are currently living in, or have experienced living in poverty and their families. Their voices must inform the development of the legislative and policy framework and delivery and evaluation of progress towards eradicating child poverty, at all levels, including the national poverty and inequality commission.

Any other issues you think are relevant to this Bill.

15. From our experience of working with children and families across Scotland we know that income maximisation is a key lever for families to get out of poverty. In Scotland alone 170 000[^i] children were lifted out of poverty between the mid1990s and 2010 as a result of investment in child benefit and child tax credit. Children 1st recognise that some of the levers for income maximisation remain at Westminster, but believe we should not underestimate the opportunities provided by the transfer of new social security powers to Scotland to significantly reduce rates of child poverty.

16. By making immediate use of the forthcoming benefit top up powers the Scottish Government could provide a significant boost to the income of families living in, or at risk of poverty. This would significantly reduce the numbers of children, who are otherwise likely to fall into poverty over the next four years. In the long term Children 1st would prefer a redistributive approach to benefits that targets those most in need. However the administrative complexity of means-tested benefits mean that take up rates are lower for these, than for universal child benefit and errors and delay in the delivery of means tested benefits are resulting in people ending up in acute income crisis. We have worked with a number of families in Scotland where the complexities of the child tax credit system have left them destitute as a result of claw back of overpayments.

17. Children 1st therefore believe the simplest and most effective way to boost the incomes of families living in, or at risk of poverty would be a single rate top up to child benefit, as outlined by the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland Options for the use of new powers to top up benefits to reduce child poverty. Professor Jonathan Bradshaw of the University of York suggests that topping up child benefit by £5 per week would in itself reduce child poverty in Scotland by 14% (over 30 000) after housing costs. Families living in, or at risk of poverty, need urgent support now. By making brave and immediate use of the social security powers coming to Scotland, the Scottish Parliament can begin to make rapid advances to achieving the ambition of eradicating child poverty for today’s and future generations.

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