End Child Poverty members response to Social Security Committee call for written evidence on Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill

March 2017

About End Child Poverty

This submission is produced by members of End Child Poverty (ECP) in Scotland including the Child Poverty Action Group, The Poverty Alliance, Barnardo’s Scotland, One Parent Families Scotland, Children 1st and Children in Scotland.

Duty to eradicate child poverty and the child poverty targets

As members of End Child Poverty we warmly welcome the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill. We are pleased that the Bill contains a duty to eradicate child poverty and that there are clear and identifiable targets about when this should be done. We particularly welcome the fact that the Bill proposes establishing four income based targets which will be measured after housing costs. Members of End Child Poverty work with children young people and their families who face a range of different difficulties and challenges. What many of them have in common is that they face these challenges living on a very low income. Income very much matters to the quality of their day to day lives.

The need for interim targets

In addition to the 2030 targets listed in sections two to five of the Bill, ECP believe there is a need for the legislation to include interim targets to ensure government is on track towards its final goals. While greater consideration of the nature of interim targets may be required, ECP believe a good starting point might be an expectation that Scottish Ministers 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.

There is a useful legislative precedent in the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009 which requires annual reporting on targets – advised by an independent panel – an interim target and a final target. ECP believe that this model is worth consideration as part of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill.

Delivery Plans

It is essential that the contents of the delivery plans described in section seven are linked directly to achievement of the proposed child poverty targets. As such, ECP believe that Delivery Plans should describe how the Scottish Government will use all of the major financial and policy tools at its disposal to progress towards these targets. The Bill should therefore include a list of policy areas that must be covered in the delivery plans. And where the evidence base suggests there would be a positive contribution to the eradication of child poverty, such as:

- the full use of Scottish social security powers
- the provision of information, advice and assistance to parents and carer 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.

The need for independent scrutiny
ECP members 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.

The need for a measurement framework through which to assess local and national progress
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 carer in relation to welfare rights and income maximisation
- the provision of suitable and affordable housing
- the availability of childcare

The need for a strategic, forward-looking duty on local authorities and health boards
As it is currently drafted, the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill 2017 places a duty on local authorities and health boards to produce “local child poverty action reports”. These reports would describe action taken in each local authority area in the last year for the purpose of contributing to the achievement of the child poverty targets. While incorporation of local authorities and health boards in the legislative framework is hugely welcome, 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. ECP 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.

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

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