Social security committee: Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill

1. Introduction

1.1 The Poverty Alliance is the national anti-poverty network in Scotland, established in 1992. We are an independent organisation with over 240 members drawn from the voluntary and public sectors, trade unions, researchers, faith groups and individuals with direct experience of poverty. Our aim is to work with others to enable communities and individuals to tackle poverty. We have a number of key policy areas that provide the focus for our activities; these are addressing low incomes, supporting services to address poverty, enhancing the participation of people with direct experience of poverty in policy development processes, and addressing attitudes to poverty.

2. The Bill

2.1 The Poverty Alliance welcomes the decision of the Scottish Government to bring forward a Child Poverty Bill. We believe that this is a necessary and important step forward in the fight against child poverty in Scotland. There are currently 260,000 children living in poverty in Scotland, and 70 per cent of them are living in a household where someone works.\(^1\) We were very disappointed by the decision of the UK Government to repeal large sections of the Child Poverty Act 2010 and are pleased that the Scottish Government has now brought forward its own proposals for tackling and measuring poverty.

2.2 We know that there are many causes of child poverty, and therefore tackling child poverty will require a holistic approach. It is also important that the children experiencing poverty are not seen in isolation. The Child Poverty Bill must be part of a wider anti-poverty strategy. Too often our approaches to addressing have been piecemeal and uncoordinated. There has been a failure to connect actions taken at the local and national levels, and lack of proper representation. It is important to see the reduction of child poverty as intimately linked to our efforts to address poverty across all age groups. Our efforts to tackle child poverty will be

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hampered if they are not linked to ensuring that young adults, those who will be starting families, cannot live lives free from poverty.

3. Ending child poverty

3.1 While poverty is about more than money, income is at the very heart of it. There are currently 260,000 children living in poverty in Scotland\(^2\), and research shows that by topping up child benefit by five pounds per week we could reduce this figure by 30,000.\(^3\)

3.2 Child benefit has a high take up rate, and the Poverty Alliance believes that by increasing its value we could protect family incomes from further erosion as a result of cuts from the UK Government.

3.3 The Poverty Alliance believes that topping up child benefit is an important step in the fight against poverty, and therefore the scope of the current bill should be widened to include a commitment to doing this.

4. Targets relating to child poverty

4.1 The Poverty Alliance welcomes making incomes targets statutory. Like others, we were disappointed to see the UK Government give up on the Child Poverty Act 2010 targets for the eradication of poverty by 2020 but accept that this target is now unrealistic for the Scottish Government.

4.2 We are supportive of the targets set out in clause 1 of the Bill. We are particularly pleased to see the target for persistent poverty set at 5 per cent, which is the level we recommended to the UK Government in the 2014 consultation.

4.3 In order to track progress, the Poverty Alliance believes there is a need for interim targets. Further consideration would need to be given as to what these would be but there are a number of options available including annual targets, targets around the delivery plan years or one target at the halfway point i.e. 2024.

5. Delivery plans and progress reports

\(^2\) Scottish Government (2017) Poverty and income inequality statistics
http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/03/2213/4

5.1 In order to make the delivery plans meaningful, the Poverty Alliance would like to see Clause 7 amended to ensure that Ministers are required to set out the measures that they will take during the period of the delivery plan for the purpose of meeting the child poverty targets. We support the inclusion of the following:

- the facilitation of employment for parents and carers
- 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 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.

Such a provision would mirror 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.

5.2 Under the list of people and organisations that must be consulted when Ministers are drafting the delivery plan, there needs to be an additional category added to ensure that people with direct experience are consulted with. People with direct experience of poverty are experts and they should be treated as such.

5.3 Both 7 (4) and 8 (3) require Ministers to lay delivery plans and progress reports before parliament but there should be additional subsections added requiring parliamentary approval for delivery plans and scrutiny for progress reports.

5.4 In the event of the child poverty target not being met, clause 9 (4), the final report should also set out a new target and detail how this will be achieved. It is not enough for the Minister to simply report that the target has not been met and explain why.

6. Independent, expert scrutiny of the Scottish Government’s progress

6.1 There is a need for an independent body to take over some of the roles previously fulfilled by the Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission at a UK level. Previously, the commission was responsible for producing an annual report on the progress made on income targets.

6.2 This commission would be responsible for scrutinising delivery plans and progress reports, monitoring progress, producing draft reports and advising Ministers.
7. The need for a measurement framework through which to assess local and national progress

7.1 In addition to the four high level targets contained within the Bill (clauses 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.

7.2 While the Scottish Government have already indicated their willingness to produce such a measurement framework, we 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 high quality employment for parents and carers
- the full use of Scottish social security powers
- the provision of high quality information, advice and assistance to parents
- the provision of high quality affordable housing

8. Local child poverty action report

8.1 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 welcome, we are concerned that clause 10 is insufficient in that it is backward looking, requiring local authorities to describe what they have done rather than plan for future actions. Instead, 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.

8.2 Options to ensure a strategic approach is taken locally include:

- A stand-alone duty to produce local child poverty strategies
- General duty to take a strategic approach to tackling child poverty
- Duty to include the eradication of child poverty in Local Outcome Improvement Plans (LOIPs)
- Duty to include the need to eradicate child poverty in Children’s Services Plans.
9. Conclusion

9.1 While the Poverty Alliance has welcomed the introduction of the Child Poverty Bill, we believe that the above changes could be used to strengthen the bill and help ensure that we achieve the target of the eradication of child poverty by March 2031.

9.2 This Bill needs to set out in detail how the targets will be achieved. It is not simply enough to say that poverty will be eradicated; we need to set out how this will be done.

9.3 With child poverty rising in Scotland, and currently at 26 per cent\(^4\), achieving the targets in the bill will not be easy. It will require the involvement of all sectors, as clearly illustrated by the fact that so many children in poverty are in working households. The Scottish Government must work with people with direct experience of poverty, the organisations that represent them and representatives from the public and private sectors in order to eradicate child poverty.

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\(^4\) The Scottish Government (2017) Poverty and Income statistics
http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/03/2213/4