



Child Poverty Bill for Scotland

The UNISON Scotland evidence to the Social Security Committee March 2017

Introduction

UNISON Scotland is the largest trade union in Scottish public services. Our members deliver services, pay taxes and also have a wider citizenship interest in how services are provided and paid for and therefore have an important role to play in policy development. Members work in a number of key roles involved in both tackling and mitigating poverty and sadly some members are also experiencing poverty and hardship. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the committee on a Child Poverty Bill.

Evidence

Growing up in poverty has a detrimental impact on children and their life chances. Children who grow up in poverty are significantly less likely to do well in schools so childhood poverty affects them long into adulthood. In order for our country to thrive we must ensure that everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

There are currently 260,000 children living in poverty in Scotland, a four per cent growth from the previous year. Many of our members are working long hours to make ends meet: struggling to pay bills or unable to afford to take up more hours because of the high costs or unavailability of child care. Many would like to work more hours but cuts to public services mean that those hours are no longer available. Alongside this, many are working unpaid hours to try and get the job done due to staff shortages.

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 in child 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.

UNISON welcomed the decision of the Scottish government to bring forward a Child Poverty Bill to restore the commitments in the Labour government's UK Child Poverty Act 2010. This will be a useful step but the existence of a comprehensive national anti-poverty strategy in itself does not guarantee success. It will allow us to collectively identify all those changes that are required to reduce poverty. It is important that the Bill does more than just set targets, we would hope that the Bill will set in place substantial programmes with appropriate funding to ensure that the laudable aims are met.

UNISON supports making income targets statutory. In addition, we would like to see interim targets enabling us to track progress and ensure that the actions taken are having the desired impact on child poverty levels. Any targets need to form part of the regular process of holding the Scottish government and other public bodies to account. We would therefore like to see the Parliament and its committees given (and taking) responsibility for ensuring that monitoring and meeting the targets is part of their ongoing work. The aim is to eradicate poverty, setting targets is only matters as a means to that end not an end in itself.

Links between the national strategy and local implementation could be improved by creating a socio-economic impact duty. We believe the Scottish government should place a duty on public sector bodies that requires them to exercise their functions in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome that result from socio-economic disadvantage. This will ensure that the poorest are protected and supported as spending decisions are being taken, and would prevent national strategies from being undermined at times of budget cuts. The duties need to be adhered to in a meaningful way once in place.

UNISON is concerned that the current equalities duties are not being implemented. Even in the Scottish government Equalities Impacts Assessments appear to be completed as an afterthought, sometimes after the consultation process is over. The EIA for the Post-16 Education Bill, for example, did not raise the risks from the move from part-time to full-time course provision on women or people with disabilities. Setting up duties must be the start of a process, not the aim of the process.

The Christie Commission called for a bottom up approach to designing public services and this Bill offers an opportunity to follow that model. This means including partners in education, social work, policing and people living in poverty. We all have a contribution to make to tackling child poverty and therefore must all be able to do it. It is important that all partners are able to work together to do so.

UNISON strongly supports using the same income-based targets as in the Child Poverty Act 2010. Too much time in the media and public discourse in general focuses on behaviour and lays blame on those in poverty for their predicament rather than the economic and social structures which cause poverty. While there is no perfect definition of poverty, we believe that the combination of these four measures provides the most accurate understanding of what poverty is. Poverty is about more than money but ultimately living on a low income is at its core. It is therefore essential that income-based measures are at the centre of how we measure and report on poverty.

UNISON believes that the Scottish Government's proposals are reasonable. We were disappointed that the UK government chose to set the target for persistent child poverty at seven per cent, and so welcome the more ambitious target of five per cent being set. The new powers coming to Scotland as part of the Scotland Act 2016 provide an opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the fight against child poverty, and would like to see the Scottish government use the full extent of its powers to both raise extra money via its tax powers and invest that money in both increasing the incomes of those living in poverty and investing in public services to ensure that they are able to access high quality services. For example: topping up child benefit by five pounds per week would reduce child poverty in Scotland by 14 per cent.

Good schools, parks, social housing, environmental health, refuse collection and street cleaning will mitigate the impact of poverty on our citizens and support them to improve their lives and communities. Tackling poverty will not be easy and it will require substantial upfront investment. It will though be worthwhile and will bring substantial future savings to the public purse.

UNISON was fully behind the target of eradicating child poverty and is deeply disappointed that those targets are unlikely to be met. These are not tick boxes but real children living in difficult circumstances which for many will blight their whole lives. We therefore support the Scottish Government's proposal to set targets and call on them to ensure that they have measures in place to meet them, even if there are substantial economic shocks.

Reducing and eradicating poverty are achievable but require focus, funding and commitment. It will mean a radical over-haul of the taxation and social security systems and we therefore believe that the proposed timescale is reasonable however that does not mean we cannot make substantial progress quickly. It is therefore important that there are interim targets set along the way to ensure that progress is being made.

Public services play a key role in tackling poverty. Funding services via taxation is the most efficient and fairest way to deliver services, ensuring equality of access. People living in poverty in most countries have to go without access to a range of services like education, health

services, clean water, sanitation and refuse collection and recycling. Our public services play a vital role in mitigating the impact of poverty inequality on our citizens. Investing in public services particularly local government services will be essential to achieving the aims of this Bill. Public services are key employers and the government must also use that power as both as a direct employer, and through its procurement processes to ensure that those employed via public money have decent wages, pensions and terms and conditions to ensure they are not living in poverty.

UNISON is generally supportive of the need for local progress reports but in a time of serious cuts to local budgets it is important that any extra duties placed on local authorities are matched with the appropriate funding to meet those obligations.

Conclusion

UNISON is the largest trade union in Scottish public services. UNISON believes that tackling child poverty is an important and achievable aim. We support the Scottish Government's aims in this Bill. We would like to see the Bill include more than target setting and to include concrete programmes and appropriate funding to ensure that child poverty is eradicated and for the parliament's committees to take a wider role in ensuring that outcomes are met. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity provide evidence to the Social Security Committee.

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