



Child Poverty Bill for Scotland

The UNISON Scotland response to the Scottish Government Consultation on a Child Poverty Bill **September 2016**

Introduction

UNISON 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 take part in the consultation on a Child Poverty Bill.

Response

Do you agree with the Scottish Government including in statute an ambition to eradicate child poverty?

There are currently 220,000 children living in poverty, and two-thirds of them are living in a household where someone works.¹ 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.

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

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. Useful national approaches, such as the Child Poverty Strategy or the Achieving Our Potential Framework, have not led to the change that should have been expected. The existence of a comprehensive national anti-poverty strategy does not guarantee success, but it does allow us to collectively identify all those changes that are required to reduce poverty. We must build on the work done as part of the Fairer Scotland consultation and complete work on the strategy. This strategy should be long-term, cover all groups and ages and should ensure that people can realise their fundamental human rights.

UNISON welcomes the decision of the Scottish Government to bring forward a Child Poverty Bill to restore the commitments in the Labour government's Child Poverty Act 2010. This will be a useful step in tackling poverty. Eradicating child poverty will not only change the lives of those children currently living in poverty it will transform Scotland and result in substantial savings to the public purse where we currently spend millions of pounds dealing with the problems caused by poverty and inequality.

It is important though 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 of the Bill are met.

¹ The Scottish Government (2016) Poverty and Income Inequality 2014/15
<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0050/00502180.pdf>

2. What are your views on making income targets statutory?

UNISON Scotland 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.

3. How do you think the role of the Ministerial Advisory Group on Child Poverty can be developed to ensure that they play a key role in developing the legislation?

The Ministerial Advisory Group on child poverty should be expanded to include people with direct experience of poverty. It is important that the group is consulted regularly and able to frame the problems as well as the solutions. It is important that the group is well informed and continues to reach out to all those involved in tackling poverty to provide as much feedback to the government. The group should be chaired by the Minister and should meet regularly at least four times a year.

4. How can links between the national strategy and local implementation be improved? What could local partners do to contribute to meeting these national goals? This might include reporting and sharing best practice or developing new strategic approaches.

Tackling poverty will require a joined up approach which cuts across all government departments and layers of government. The Child Poverty Act is an opportunity not just to set targets but to implement a wider anti-poverty strategy. This strategy will require adequate funding and targeting services and money at those in poverty.

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. 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 highlight 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 etc and people living in poverty. We all have a contribution to make to tackling child poverty and therefore must all be able to it is important that all partners are able to work together to do so.

5. What are your views on the income based measures of poverty proposed for Scottish child poverty targets? For example, are there any additional income-based measures you think we should also use (and if so, why)?

Are there any alternative approaches to measuring income – for example, as used in other countries – that you think could apply in Scotland?

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.

6. What are your views on the Scottish Government's proposals for the levels of child poverty that the targets will be set at?

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 7 per cent, and so welcome the more ambitious target of 5 per cent being set. The new powers coming to Scotland as part of the Scotland Act 2016 provide an opportunity to 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.

7. What are your views on the Scottish Government's proposal to set targets on an after housing costs basis? For example, are there any disadvantages to this approach that we have not already considered?

UNISON believes that "an after housing costs" measure is the most accurate measure as people's housing costs are fixed and have to be paid every month regardless of income. However it should not be a case of on or other in terms of before or after housing costs. Both measures have a role to play particularly given the growth in the private rented sector and the increasingly high rents many households are paying in both the private and "affordable" rented sectors. UNISON therefore recommends that both are used.

8. What are your views on the Scottish Government's proposal to set targets that are expected to be achieved by 2030?

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 like the 2008 crash. Despite that crash we continue to live in a wealth country. Wealth is not in short supply it is concentrated in too few hands. We understand that this is to be the same timeline for the Fairer Scotland Action Plan and support linking these two. While other frameworks ending in 2030 are mentioned, the Race Equality Framework 2016-2030 is not, despite BME people being twice as likely to live in poverty as white British individuals and despite 36% of non-white minority ethnic children having an annual household income in the lowest quintiles, compared to 22% of white children. We therefore support linking all of these strategies under a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy.

Tackling poverty is achievable but requires focus, funding and commitment. It will mean a radical over-haul of the taxation and social security systems and we therefore believe that this timeline is most appropriate, however, it is also important that there are interim targets set along the way to allow us to monitor progress.

9. What are your views on the proposal that Scottish Ministers will be required by the Bill to produce a Child Poverty Delivery Plan every five years, and to report on this Plan annually?

UNISON supports the proposal that Scottish Ministers will be required to produce a Child Poverty Delivery Plan every five years and report on this annually. It is important that this delivery plan is adequately resourced and that resources required for its realisation are set aside at each spending review between now and 2030.

The delivery plan must also clearly set out actions, allocate responsibilities and identify funds. We would also support an annual opportunity for this to be reviewed and refreshed.

10. Do you have any suggestions for how the measurement framework could usefully be improved? For example, are there any influencing factors that are not covered by the measurement framework? Or are there any additional indicators that could be added?

Alongside colleagues on the End Child Poverty Campaign, we welcomed the introduction of the Child Poverty Measurement Framework in 2015. However, we believe that the contents of any renewed framework measurement are more closely linked with four income based targets. While many of the current indicators are useful, others are not directly linked to poverty including smoking and ease at talking to parents. We would like to see new measures linked directly to the proposed new income targets focusing on maximising household incomes.

11. Do you have any additional views on a Child Poverty Bill for Scotland?

Public services play a key role in tackling poverty. Funding services via taxation is the most efficient and fairer way to delivery services, ensuring equality of access. People living in poverty in most countries have to go without access to 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 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.

Conclusion

UNISON is the largest trade union in Scottish public services. UNISON believes that tackling child poverty is an important and achievable aim. We therefore support the Scottish Governments aims in this Bill. We would therefore like to see the bill include more than target setting and too include concrete programmes and appropriate funding to ensure that child poverty is eradicated. UNISON therefore welcomes the opportunity to take part in the consultation on a Child Poverty Bill.

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