

Parenting UK responds to the Consultation on the Child Poverty Strategy 2014-2017

“The Government aims to reduce child poverty across the United Kingdom. We also recognise that many of the policy levers which are needed to reduce poverty are the responsibility of the devolved administrations and that many of the actions outlined in this strategy will only apply to England. Each of the devolved administrations is responsible for producing their own strategy on child poverty and for taking action on child poverty in those areas where policy is devolved. The Government will continue to work closely with the devolved administrations to reduce child poverty across all parts of the United Kingdom.”

The consultation opened in February 2014 and closed on 22 May 2014. You can see the document here <http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations>

This consultation response has been coordinated by Parenting UK (part of Family Lives)'s Engagement Team. For more information please contact info@parentinguk.org

Our approach

To what extent do you agree that the draft strategy achieves a good balance between tackling poverty now and tackling the drivers of inter-generational poverty?

<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Agree	<input type="checkbox"/> Neither agree nor disagree
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Disagree	<input type="checkbox"/> Strongly disagree	

Comments:

We welcome the Government's intentions to address child poverty through supporting families to achieve a better work-life balance and improve the life chances of children and young people. As it currently stands, the balance seems to be more in favour of the short term. This balance needs to be shift and consider a longer term vision if the short term measures are to be effective. The current strategy risks creating further problems for future generations by focussing on current crises and letting slip the early intervention measures that can be so effective in improving long term outcomes and saving future public spending.

Factors such as the cost of childcare, the availability of flexible working, the value of universal parenting support, and the long term emotional resilience of family members will prove crucial to building a successfully integrated provision of services into a joined-up whole-family approach that uses the lessons learned from what we know to be the causes of poverty today, helping to build preventative measures against further inter-generational poverty.

Our approach

Considering the current fiscal climate, what is your view of the actions set out in the draft strategy?

Comments:

There is a cycle of inter-generational poverty that needs to be broken if long term solutions are to prevail. Initially, the proposals for Universal Credit, and plans to “make work pay” seem like a positive step. We welcome the Government’s intentions to create a safer transition from benefits into work, but question some of the gaps that remain in the methodology, particularly for those already facing some of the greatest difficulties in managing the cost of living.

Significant areas such as the cost of childcare, which we know to be a major concern for many parents, have not been adequately addressed in the proposals. As has already been reported, the social group who stands to be hardest hit by the shift to Universal Credit is single parents, facing unaffordable childcare costs that mean returning to work or increasing working hours could ultimately cost them more than remaining on benefits.

Due to these factors, those parents with already high housing costs facing high childcare costs may find themselves with a reduced income after they increase their working hours and see their Universal Credit decreased. The threshold for what a single parent can earn before their Universal Credit is reduced is simply too low. For this scheme to work, these families and their circumstances would need to be more carefully considered when putting it in place. The goal of the change is to “make work pay” when perhaps it should be to “make work pay for all”.

In cases where the transition between benefits and work is less than smooth, the Government needs to ensure that the system is robust enough to achieve its own goals and that proper support is in place to help families and parents navigate the system.

The current measures to address the cost of childcare are a promising start and give some indication that the Government has an awareness of the importance of this, and how ensuring the provision of affordable childcare can lift a significant barrier to returning to work. We welcome the focus on raising the quality of early years education, as we know this to be an important factor in the long term wellbeing of children and families, with positive links to educational attainment, employment, crime reduction, and other factors that can reduce the burden on public spending in the long term.

Under the current scheme, those parents in the lowest income bracket can claim 15 hours of free childcare for their children from the age of two. This, again, is an encouraging first step but still leaves many hours of expensive childcare throughout the rest of the week.

There have also been a number of reports of childcare providers struggling to meet the demands of the free early years entitlement. The scheme has so far failed to reach all of the 130,000 eligible families and many providers have already filled all of their available places, and others have been forced to fund the entitlement themselves without support from their Local Authority.

The Government must ensure that it makes sufficient funding available to providers, putting a robust system in place to meet the demand of the free childcare offer, especially given the plans to double this demand to 260,000 later this year.

Gathering ideas

At a local level, what works well for preventing poor children becoming poor adults?

Comments:

The strategy refers to the benefits of supporting a good home environment, but lacks a deeper insight into how the Government intends to achieve this.

The CANparent parenting class voucher trial, which offered free parenting classes to parents of children under five, has evolved into a market development project, aiming to support providers of universal parenting support to develop their offers and work towards a recognised Quality Mark. This project is a good indicator of the Government's intentions and recognition of the benefits of providing high quality support to all parents.

In addition, we would like to draw attention to the situation that many local authorities and children's centres now find themselves in. Due to often severe budget cuts at a local level, services which have traditionally been able to support families universally now find themselves with limited resources, forced to work primarily at crisis level, with families who are already struggling.

We have already addressed the value of early intervention support, and the savings this can represent to public spending in the long term, as well as the overall effect of increased mental, physical and social wellbeing among families who are well supported. By cutting funds for these valuable services to save money in the short term, the Government is neglecting to take care of the longer term and risks adding to public costs in the future. If Local Authority funds are not ring-fenced for universal parenting and family support, only those at crisis point will be served, leaving those who could benefit from early intervention to spiral silently towards crises of their own, unnoticed in the background. This short term vision may be saving a few pounds now, but could prove incredibly costly for future generations if it is not changed soon.

We would urge the Government to look back on the 2010 Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances and reiterate its call to offer parenting classes routinely, supporting an attitudinal shift towards normalising support, so that all parents know they can seek out a parenting class, or some form of quality support in their local community with the same attitude and ease as seeking out an ante-natal class.

What more can central government do to help employers, local agencies and the voluntary and community sector work together to end child poverty?

Comments:

We support a joined-up approach to services that recognises and understands and the negative impact of chaotic family environments and the positive impact of well-balanced family environments on a range of life chance factors such as mental health, physical health, school attendance, parental employment, and so on.

Creating more links between local services such as GPs and schools with providers of parenting support and early years education will help to close some of the socio-economic gaps that affect families on lower incomes. GPs and schools are often the best placed agencies to signpost families to other services as they have regular access and opportunities to engage with families in need of further support that they might not otherwise know is available.

Family Lives has worked to increase to links between GPs and parenting support, and we encourage a whole family approach that links those services which families are already using with other services on offer, so that local professionals are well placed to signpost to effective support. Local Authorities should also be encouraged and supported to keep an updated database of support services that is shared with other service providers so that when a parent does choose to seek out support, they can find it through one point of contact, whether that be the local authority, their registered GP, a children's centre worker, or a member of school staff. Family Information Services provide this function, but again have faced severe cuts and therefore many struggle to maintain up to date information.

We also know that flexible working can benefit employers and employees alike and we urge the Government to ensure that employers understand this too. We have heard from a number of parents who have been refused flexible working hours, making it harder for them to achieve a healthy and manageable work-life balance and leading to increased difficulties and costs with childcare.

Mothers and fathers should be afforded the opportunity, where possible, to work flexible hours with options for home based working to make their home and work lives more effective. This can help boost work productivity, reduce childcare costs and improve family relationships. Similarly, fathers, same sex parents and adoptive parents should be given the same rights as biological mothers when choosing to take parental leave. The current measures for reforming paternal leave do not go far enough to ensuring that all fathers are eligible, should a family decide to prioritise the mother's career while the father takes a primary childcare role.

As stated before, we would also urge the Government to ensure that the free childcare entitlement goals can be achieved, by ensuring Local Authorities are able to transfer adequate funding to providers. This funding should reflect the differing costs of childcare in different geographical areas, rather than being split arbitrarily across the board.

As a further protective measure for current and future generations of children and young people, we support an increased focus on ensuring they can build their resilience and self-esteem. This has been shown to work successfully in schools who offer a 'whole school' approach to delivering Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). Supporting young people to develop their own

emotional resilience and sense of self can have a positive impact on rates of sexual bullying, teenage pregnancy, educational attainment and transitions from education into work.

We believe that a joined-up approach to services is best for families, with health and education working together to ensure that parents are supported through ante-natal services, the crucial early years phase and beyond into school, allowing children to have the very best start in life.

We hope that the Government will continue to support local authorities to maintain children's centres and parenting support, not just for 'those who need it most' but universally so that the cultural shift towards ensuring that learning to be a better parent is seen as a normal and an everyday activity, can continue to grow.