



The Church of Scotland

Church and Society Council

## Official Response

**SUBJECT:** Measuring Child Poverty: A consultation on better measures of child poverty

**REQUESTED BY:** UK Government Department for Work and Pensions and Department for Education

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**SUBMITTED BY:** David Bradwell, Associate Secretary, Church and Society Council, [dbradwell@cofscotland.org.uk](mailto:dbradwell@cofscotland.org.uk)

### Introduction

As part of our commitment to tackling poverty at international, national and local levels, the Church of Scotland supports the *End Child Poverty Campaign* and the response from that coalition. We welcome the Government's continuing commitment to ending child poverty, and the implicit recognition that further action is required to achieve that goal.

However, the current consultation has created confusion around that commitment. The consultation document claims that "income is a key part of our understanding of child poverty". The assurances were repeated at the Scottish consultation event on 12 February 2012, where it was stated that there was no intention to depart from the statutory criteria. Despite this, the Secretary of State told the House of Commons on 21 January that the consultation was "about a better way to measure real child poverty that the coalition Government will set and measure ourselves against. Income will be part of it, but not the dominant part" and referred to "the arbitrary target in 1997-98".

Despite the focus throughout the consultation on an anomaly in the relative poverty measurement, there are four measures of child poverty in the Child Poverty Act, developed through extensive consultation with academics, children's charities and those experiencing poverty and reflecting a range of approaches to poverty measurement used by the OECD, EU and developed nations. These therefore achieved strong cross-party support and allowed credible international comparisons alongside consistent charting of progress through time. These measures must retain primacy over any other measures or indicators of child poverty; along with the *severe child poverty* measure included in the government's child poverty strategy, they give a robust and consistent means of measuring child poverty and driving policy.

Just as national prosperity is not solely a matter of growth in GDP, poverty has many dimensions. We therefore welcome the recognition that the realities of living in poverty are

multi-faceted. However the development of a multidimensional measure of poverty, as proposed in the consultation, confuses the causes, effects, characteristics and risk factors of poverty and seeks to roll these together into a new measurement.

Such a conglomerate measurement as envisaged here would move away from the core meaning of poverty as a lack of adequate material resources; it could exclude many children living in significant material poverty (e.g. where parents are working), and as proposed would include specific problems which are not the lived experience of poverty for most children (including long-term parental unemployment, young people as carers, family breakdown and children living in households where there is drug and alcohol dependency).

Inclusion of criteria like parental skill levels or employability will result in measuring policies which are believed to impact on policy without actually measuring their impact on poverty.

The proposed composite measure embeds value judgments in apparently "neutral" statistics, and makes assumptions about the characteristics of people in poverty. It is hard to resist the sense that many of the chosen measurements are fuelled by and aimed at reinforcing the stereotyping and stigmatising of people living in poverty; if the aim is that "we need to think differently about child poverty", that should start by setting aside the narrative of stigma and blame that characterises current debate.

The multi-dimensional nature of poverty is currently well-reflected by the index of multiple deprivation, and – in policy terms – by the building blocks of policy in the Child Poverty Act. Developing key indicators within these existing building blocks would help policy development. Rather than adjusting the current accepted measurement, policy could be sharpened by poverty-proofing new policy proposals with a robust analysis of their impact on child poverty. The commitment set out in the consultation does not sit well with changes in the welfare benefits system which the Government has admitted will put some 200,000 children into poverty.

The Church of Scotland has in recent years pioneered a different approach to tackling poverty through its support of the work of the Poverty Truth Commission. Fundamentally, this is rooted in listening to the experiences of people living in poverty and taking that experience seriously as a starting point for policy making. It is disappointing that nothing of the proposed new multi-dimensional measurement involves recording the experiences of families living in poverty, especially when subjective criteria such as "business confidence" and "consumer confidence" are widely used elsewhere to measure and to drive policy. Understanding poverty cannot be done solely from the outside by people removed from direct experience of what it means, nor with only "objective" quantitative data; nor can policy be developed without listening to lived experience.

Our tradition embodies faith-based action to tackle material poverty, at personal, community, national and international levels. Finding new and effective ways of doing that is a constant priority. Our clearest concern here is that the proposed multi-dimensional measure will divert attention and action from dealing with the poverty which Peter Townsend defined as a "lack (of) resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the

activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong"<sup>1</sup>.

It is from this fundamental perspective that we offer comment on some of the questions posed in the consultation paper.

**Q1: Are there other dimensions we should consider for inclusion in a multidimensional measure of child poverty?**

We believe that developing a new measure of child poverty is more likely to reinforce stereotypes and stigma, and to cause confusion, than to improve effectiveness of policy to tackle and eliminate child poverty. Tracking of quantitative and qualitative indicators that reflect the wider experiences of children growing up in low-income homes, as a guide for policy, would be helpful. However, the existing four measures must retain primacy and be used to reflect the total number of children living in poverty.

Work on wellbeing (including the general work done by the Carnegie Trust with the Scottish Government and the work currently being done by the ONS on child wellbeing) may prove a means through which government can correlate children's experiences with low income and develop appropriate policy responses. The work of the Poverty Truth Commission could similarly inform policy-making here.

**Q2: How should we measure income as a dimension in a future multidimensional measure of child poverty? How important are relative and absolute income?**

We don't believe that developing a new measure of child poverty will be helpful. As at present, both the relative and absolute low income measures are important and central to our understanding of poverty and should be used to track the impact that policy is having on households experiencing poverty. We share concerns about proposals which undermine these.

**Q3: How does the ownership of assets such as a house affect our understanding of poverty?**

We don't believe that developing a new measure of child poverty will be helpful. Assessment of disposable wealth could be a helpful additional indicator alongside income, but much harder to measure.

**Q5: How important is worklessness as a dimension in a future multidimensional measure of child poverty?**

While worklessness is a child poverty risk factor, most children in poverty have at least one parent working. Making this a criterion of poverty assumes that work automatically removes poverty, and that we are content that worklessness should result in poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> P Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, Penguin: 1979

**Q8: How important is unmanageable debt as a dimension in a future multidimensional measure of child poverty?**

We don't believe that developing a new measure of child poverty will be helpful.

Assessment of indebtedness could be a helpful additional indicator alongside income, but hard to measure equitably. Government should take steps to reduce the financial pressure on low-income families and to undermine the poverty premium which leaves people in poverty paying more for e.g. fuel, food and credit.

However, rolling debt into a poverty measure could fail to capture the dilemmas and different coping strategies of those who cut back on food and fuel or take on debts to keep families fed and warm.

**Q18: How important is family stability as a dimension in a future multidimensional?**

"Family stability" is such a vague term as to be useless here. While supportive family life can make a huge difference to any child, conflating some arbitrary indicator into a measure of poverty is not helpful and likely to feed stigmatisation. Currently 57% of children living in poverty are in couple households.<sup>2</sup>

**Q23: How should we recognise parental drug and alcohol dependence and mental health conditions in a multidimensional measure of child poverty?**

Again this feeds from and into a stereotype. Alcohol and drug misuse are clearly problems which affect some parents and therefore detrimentally impact on children. However, they are not exclusive to households in poverty nor are they appropriate parts of a definition or measure of poverty.

**Q24: How can parental disability and general poor parental health be reflected in a multidimensional measure of child poverty?**

Disability is widely and rightly recognised as a major poverty risk factor. But the aim should be to break that link rather than rolling it into the definition of poverty.

**Q25: Are there other criteria that we should evaluate a new measure against?**

We remain unconvinced of the need for a new measure, for the reasons given above. If there were to be a new measure it should not be seen as replacing the existing measures in the Child Poverty Act. It should also:

- include qualitative data reflecting the experiences of families living in poverty;
- retain material poverty (both relative and absolute) as central to the definition;
- allow for tracking through time and for international comparison;
- include the whole UK, taking account of differences between data collected in different constituent parts;

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/why-end-child-poverty/key-facts>

- include adequate funding for devolved administrations and local authorities to participate;
- overcome rather than reinforcing stigmatising of families;
- achieve consensus to mobilise and maximise public support.