

The Child Poverty Bill – a historic opportunity that must go further

The Child Poverty Bill has been carried over to the new parliamentary term and now is the time for child poverty charities to redouble efforts to make this ground breaking Bill as strong a piece of legislation as we can. Presented in the Queen's speech 2009, the Child Poverty Bill will enshrine in law the commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020. The Bill aims to:

- define success in eradicating child poverty by establishing four UK-wide income targets to be met by 2020;
- require the Secretary of State to publish a UK child poverty strategy, setting out how targets will be met and to publish annual progress reports;
- establish a Child Poverty Commission to provide advice on the development of the child poverty strategies;
- place duties on local authorities and other delivery partners to work together to tackle child poverty.

While CPAG and child poverty campaigners welcome the Bill, further work is needed to ensure that it is as robust as possible. Giving evidence to the Bill's standing committee CPAG's Kate Green argued that meeting the 2010 child poverty target would inject credibility to the Bill. She highlighted 'a number of areas where there could be conflicts between the Bill and other legislation' – including welfare reform and the proposed



legislation to reduce public debt – and stressed the need to reduce in-work poverty (currently 59 per cent of children in poverty have a parent in work) and provide high quality childcare that enhances child wellbeing. She argued that despite fiscal constraints, spending on child pov-

erty must remain a financial priority but pointed out that local authorities can enhance family income by increasing benefit take up.

CPAG remains deeply concerned that, as the Bill stands, if 10 per cent of children were in poverty that would be defined as eradication. That is clearly not robust enough: leaving one million children in poverty is unacceptable. CPAG is also keen to ensure that the Government is required to explain to what extent it has decided to follow any recommendations made by the Child Poverty Commission, and, where it decides not to take the Commission's advice, its reasons for this. Issues around monitoring progress and tracking child poverty among statistically insignificant groups of children who face a high risk of poverty are also yet to be resolved.



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In The House

At the end of the last parliamentary term there were two pieces of legislation of interest to anti-poverty campaigners, the **Child Poverty Bill** – now carried over to the new session and detailed on p1 – and the **Welfare Reform Bill**. The Welfare Reform Bill, which received **Royal Assent on 12 November** – formulated in a time of economic growth and rising employment – is based on the assumption that work is always the best route out of poverty, and means that benefit claimants could face benefits sanctions for being unable to take place in job search or work-related activity. CPAG believes sanctions are ineffective in raising employment levels and research from the US suggests that sanctions also increase child poverty. As nearly 60 per cent of children living in poverty have a parent in work, there is also a risk that some claimants may simply move from out-of-work poverty to in-work poverty.

Despite our ongoing reservations about some aspects of Welfare Reform, a number of important safeguards have now been incorporated into the Bill – including the directive that personal advisers take child wellbeing into consideration when drawing up action plans with parents, and a number of safeguards about the quality and availability of childcare. CPAG was particularly pleased with **Lord McKenzie of Luton's** statement in the Lords accepting an amendment tabled with passion and conviction by **Baroness Thompson of Winchester** (supported by CPAG), in which he stated that the Government has 'now decided to ensure that lone parents on out of work benefits who have a child under 16 and in receipt of any rate of the care component of disability living allowance will not be required to undertake work-related activities'. CPAG is urging the Government to ensure that children in receipt of any level of the mobility component of DLA are also exempt in order to avoid confusion for parents and personal advisers, and is seeking clarification for families awaiting the outcome of an appeal. Much of the detail of the Bill will be resolved in secondary legislation and CPAG will be working hard to ensure that the regulations safeguard families from having already inadequate benefits reduced – which we believe is at odds with the aspirations outlined in the Child Poverty Bill.

Our nomination for **MP of the year** in this issue is **Andrew Selous, Conservative Shadow Minister for Work and Pensions**, who has taken lead responsibility for child poverty and other social justice issues in his party. Since his maiden speech in 2001 where he stated 'It is my wish to see the Conservative party become the party for the poor and disadvantaged', he has led the Conservatives' thinking on child poverty. Andrew argued during the Committee stage of the Child Poverty Bill that disability living allowance should not be counted as part of income in calculating child poverty as its purpose is to ensure families with disabled children are brought up to a regular standard of living while dealing with the extra expense of caring for a disabled child.



Andrew Selous MP

CPAG wins overpayments test case

Between March 2006 and February 2007 the DWP wrote to over 65,000 claimants threatening to take them to court if they did not pay back overpayments of benefits made due to errors of the DWP. Believing these letters to be unlawful, as the Government has no powers outside the statutory scheme to recover overpayments, CPAG brought a test case on the issue, and after initially failing at judicial review the case was taken to appeal where a judge found that the impact of these letters 'can be devastating to a person already living in or close to penury'. The judge ordered benefits officials not to send out such letters in future and means DWP cannot recover payments in this way.

This judgment will come as a huge relief to thousands of low-income families already struggling to make ends meet. However, the DWP has sought permission to appeal this case in the supreme court. For updates follow CPAG's website.

Pre-Budget Report demands

At the time of writing, we are awaiting Chancellor Alistair Darling's Pre-Budget Report on 9 December. This is an opportunity to bring in measures to meet the target of halving child poverty by 2010. CPAG has a number of measures it is asking the Government to implement.

- **Make work pay:** increasing the minimum wage and paying young people the same as adults along with increasing the earnings disregard for means-tested benefits will reduce high rates of in-work poverty. Flexible childcare and universal free school meals would reduce the costs of moving into work, improve children's health and generate jobs. Ensuring employers take greater responsibility for generating jobs that lift people out of poverty must be a priority.
- **Increase family income:** up-rating benefits and tax credits and increasing take-up are essential to reducing poverty in workless households. Improving support for larger families and for families affected by disability would reduce poverty among children at greatest risk of poverty.
- **Address policies that reduce family income:** many policies designed to reduce child poverty may increase it, and discrepancies and anomalies within the benefit and tax credit system are penalising some poor families. Reviewing benefit sanctions, how ESA works and tax credit administration would remove some policies that actively sap family income.
- **Reduce inequality:** despite a raft of policies designed to reduce poverty, Britain remains one of the most unequal countries in the developed world. Progressive taxation and redistribution are a social and economic priority.

Personal Finance Handbook launch

CPAG, Toynbee Hall and the Financial Services Authority (FSA) will launch the third edition of the *Personal Finance Handbook* on 10 December. This book – written by financial journalist Jonquil Lowe – offers advice on how to handle day to day finances and is an essential guide for families in the recession.

This edition has been updated to help with problems caused by the current crisis, including a larger section on banking and credit. Kate Green, CPAG Chief Executive, said: 'It's important people are given all the information they need to help family incomes stretch as far as possible in the current economic climate.' To order the book, see www.cpag.org.uk/publications.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 20th anniversary

Guest article: Dr Mike Lindsay, CRAE national coordinator

This year represents a momentous landmark in the children's rights calendar, it being 20 years since the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is the most widely adopted international legal instrument, against which all of our laws, policies and services for children and young people should be judged.

Since 1989, the subject of children's rights has, in both professional and public life, progressively shifted towards the mainstream to a point where policies are increasingly informed by some consideration of children's rights. The aspirations many of us have for children, whether as politicians, practitioners or parents, increasingly coincide with one or more of the 54 articles set out in the Convention. In fact, it is becoming ever more difficult to find specific measures within the Convention to which any reasonable person would take exception.

The Government, however, is breaching several important children's rights. Where we do most wrong by our children – poverty, criminal justice, equality, media reporting, asylum-seeking and child abuse – are areas where, as a society, we have clearly failed to give sufficient regard and emphasis to children's human rights.

The Government wants to make Britain 'the best place in the world for children to grow up'. To achieve that it will need to lead on **making children's rights everybody's business**.

Kate Green addresses Peter Townsend memorial conference

Addressing a conference in November in memory of Professor Peter Townsend, founder and former President of CPAG, Chief Executive Kate Green commented on how appropriate it was that the event was taking place on the 20th anniversary of the signing of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Peter's tireless advocacy for children's rights and for policies to eradicate child poverty continue to underpin and inform the work of CPAG today.

Kate welcomed progress since 1999 in reducing child poverty, and cross-party support for the Child Poverty Bill to put the target to end child poverty into law. But she said that Peter's legacy to the charity was an exhortation to be much bolder and more ambitious. Many of the principles that Peter argued for in the early days of CPAG – for universal benefits, an adequate family income, protection for the disabled and the unemployed – remained core demands of CPAG today. That emphasised the consistency of CPAG's values, and Peter's tremendous influence on our thinking, but Kate also interpreted it as a challenge to us to work much harder to bring his vision about.

Tackling disability poverty: a Disability Alliance manifesto for action

Disability Alliance (DA) has been working with partners, including CPAG and Counsel and Care on a 'manifesto' to tackle disability poverty to be launched on 9 December.

DA has developed a manifesto to influence politicians before the 2010 general election. DA wants to avoid the risk that action on poverty is reduced in recession and believes it is important to maintain action – with disabled people more likely to be hit first, hardest and longest by recession.

The manifesto is built around how poverty affects disabled people and their families across the life course. Roughly a third of disabled children, disabled working age adults and disabled older people live in poverty. But there is no accurate assessment of disability poverty; current measurements do not take account of lower income or higher costs of living.

The manifesto calls for an accurate assessment of disability poverty as well as a range of specific actions to tackle disability poverty.

Further information: www.disabilityalliance.org.

Help us make a difference

CPAG is the leading charity campaigning for the abolition of child poverty in the UK and for a better deal for low-income families and children. We aim to:

- raise awareness of the causes, extent, nature and impact of poverty, and strategies for its eradication and prevention;
- bring about positive policy changes for families with children in poverty; *and*
- enable those eligible for income maintenance to have access to their full entitlement.

Your donation will help us to fight the injustice of poverty.

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CPAG at SNP conference

It was standing room only at a child poverty fringe meeting at the SNP annual conference in Inverness in October. Organised by CPAG, in partnership with Save the Children, the event attracted well over 60 delegates to hear SNP politicians from Holyrood, Westminster and local government discuss the role each level of government must play to eradicate child poverty in Scotland.

Scottish Government Minister for Communities, Alex Neil MSP, looked to Scandinavia for a model of how to build a society with low levels of child poverty. He highlighted the importance of full employment, living wages, adequate levels of benefit and universal childcare. He looked to independence as the vehicle for achieving change. However, it was clear that many of the policy changes he called for were within the devolved government's current powers to influence.



Alex Neil MSP

John Mason MP, SNP Work and Pension spokesperson, talked through the implications of the Child Poverty Bill currently

before the UK and Scottish parliament, while Councillor Isabel Hutton, COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) Children and Young people spokesperson affirmed local government's commitment to tackling child poverty and pointed to kinship care support as a key area where every level of government needed to work together to ensure children and families benefit from new policies. However, she reiterated COSLA's view that any new duties on local authorities to develop local child poverty strategies, as proposed in the UK Child Poverty Bill for England and as called for by CPAG and other members of End Child Poverty in Scotland, were 'not welcome'. In response to questions from the floor Bob Doris MSP stressed that child poverty did not result from parental failure but from a failure to ensure families have the resources they need to support their children.

Call for greater local authority focus on child poverty

CPAG in Scotland has joined forces with other members of the End Child Poverty campaign in Scotland to analyse the second round of Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) between local authorities and the Scottish Government. SOAs set out the strategic priorities of local councils and their community planning partners. Disappointingly only four out of 32 councils explicitly state that tackling child poverty is a priority, and only two have set a local outcome to reduce child poverty. While action to reduce child poverty may be implicit, or just not reflected, in other agreements, the lack of clear strategic objectives relating to child poverty at local

level is, according to Head of CPAG in Scotland, John Dickie, 'extremely concerning'.

Along with other members of ECP, CPAG used debate in the Scottish Parliament on the Child Poverty Bill and its application in Scotland to press for legal duties to be placed on councils to develop local child poverty strategies, as is proposed in England and Wales. While Deputy First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, rejected the call she committed to keeping 'under review all our approaches... with a view to ensuring (they) are having the desired effect.' CPAG in Scotland will, however, contin-

ue to press for more robust mechanisms to ensure policy and spending at local level is clearly benefiting children and families in poverty.

Free school meals update

CPAG in Scotland's factsheet on free school meals has recently been updated.

Visit www.cpag.org.uk/scotland/Free-School-Meals-factsheet.htm for the details.