



## executive summary

# local authority progress in tackling child poverty

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### Background

In March 2010 the Child Poverty Bill gained Royal Assent with cross-party support. The ensuing *Child Poverty Act* (England and Wales Statutes, 2010) placed a legal obligation on government to end child poverty in the UK by 2020. It also placed new duties on devolved administrations and local government to tackle child poverty.

The Local Government Group (LG Group) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake research to assess local authorities' (LAs) progress in meeting these new duties. Specifically, the research assesses the extent to which LAs are progressing with the requirement to complete a local needs assessment and a joint local child poverty strategy. In-depth telephone interviews with 43 child poverty partnership members across nine case-study areas were conducted between January and March 2011.



## Key findings

### The status of child poverty work

The eradication of child poverty is generally considered to be a high priority across the case-study areas, with interviewees in only one partnership reporting that it is low on the LA's agenda. Areas where child poverty work has a particularly high status tend to be characterised by:

- high levels of deprivation
- a high level of strategic understanding and commitment to tackling child poverty
- a child poverty partnership that is governed by, or is a sub-group of, an existing executive body within the LA
- a view of child poverty as a cross-cutting theme across the LA area
- strong support from LA elected members, with cabinet representatives directly involved in the child poverty partnership's work.

Most interviewees are concerned that the lack of statutory and prescriptive guidance from government weakens LAs' efforts to tackle child poverty. Partnerships would appreciate greater direction and support from government, and some form of statutory guidance for LAs on tackling child poverty. They are also concerned that current public-sector budget reductions may impact upon the status of their child poverty work in the future.

### Collaborative approaches to tackling child poverty

Most partnerships are well developed and the interviewees consider them to have the key ingredients for successful collaboration:

- a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities
- a shared commitment to a common goal
- a focus on outcomes for children and families
- good leadership
- the right mix of people in the partnership.

All the partnerships include representatives from LA services, such as children's services, adult services, social care and health, transport and housing, as well as from public health, JobCentre Plus and the voluntary and community sector (VCS). Apart from a lack of private-sector involvement, interviewees generally feel that the right organisations are represented in their partnerships.

Very few partnerships have been able to pool or align their funds. More guidance and a top-level directive are needed in order to achieve this. Some think that aligning resources is a more realistic approach.

Partnerships have clear views on the guidance and support they need to drive their work forward, covering both strategic and practical support at national, regional, local and community levels. Such support includes: ongoing help from external advisors, guidance on pooling budgets, evidence of business cases and of value for money and support to keep child poverty high on the agenda as LA services are reconfigured.

### Identifying the problem and framing the response

Most partnerships have already completed a child poverty needs assessment (CPNA), although they have experienced a number of challenges in doing so. The main challenge relates to accessing and sharing appropriate data due to the time lag that often occurs between nationally produced data being collated and published. It can also be difficult for LAs to receive or share locality or super-output-level data due to data protection restrictions.

Partnerships have generally made a relatively smooth transition from assessment to strategy, and the majority expect to publish their strategies between March and April 2011. They identify a number of challenges including deciding priorities for action and committing to these in a period of economic uncertainty, service reconfiguration, job losses, and keeping the momentum going in the absence of statutory central guidance. Nevertheless, there are factors that have helped partnerships to develop their strategies:

- the same people being involved at both the assessment and strategy stages
- viewing the CPNA as a forerunner to the strategy
- making links between needs and actions
- keeping both documents live and under review.

The *Child Poverty Act* requires LAs to consult children and parents (and the organisations working with or representing each) as they think appropriate. Generally, children and young people have not been involved in strategic planning. However, some areas have successfully engaged young people through consultation or by using materials generated by young people to influence strategic developments.

### **Moving from strategy to action**

Child poverty partners are concerned about how they will turn their strategic planning into effective action, and whether their strategies will have a positive impact on families and children. Their concerns relate to budget reductions and service cut-backs, rising poverty rates due to the increasing cost of living and the enormity of the task of overcoming structural and culturally ingrained poverty.

Many believe that partnerships can make a difference if they focus on direct intervention with families rather than macro-economic issues. Most partnerships are planning to tackle poverty, initially, in small and manageable ways by focusing on specific localities, families and groups. Only one LA area is planning a coordinated intervention project resulting specifically from their child poverty strategy. Others are using a range of pre-existing interventions based on four objectives: reducing unemployment, improving financial literacy, improving health and giving children the best start in life.

The main reasons given for progress in implementation relate to:

- the strength of local partnerships
- executive and cabinet 'buy-in'.
- well-developed CPNAs and timetables for implementation
- the leadership qualities of the child poverty lead
- the availability of centrally funded child poverty grants.

### **Recommendations for policy makers and local partnerships**

Central government needs to do all it can to assuage the concerns of partnerships by making morale-boosting statements about the importance of child poverty work, providing concrete examples of how the Big Society will effectively continue the progress that has been made and giving assurances that central funding will remain in place through direct grants to LAs.

LAs can benefit from guidance on how to position their partnerships within the council structure to maximise impact. Suggestions from interviewees include sharing analyses and strategy documents with elected members and encouraging elected members or senior executive-level staff to chair partnership meetings. They also recommend that the child poverty lead has strong leadership qualities and influence across the whole LA area. Drawing senior staff from across the LA and partner organisations into the child poverty partnership is seen as key to maximising impact.

LAs currently need more support from central and local government on specific issues such as pooling and aligning budgets, evidence of 'what works' in tackling child poverty (business cases and value-for-money

examples), ways to attract the private sector to contribute to local child poverty developments and strategies for encouraging inward investment into disadvantaged areas.

A number of 'tools' would help LAs and their partners to plan and act on their strategies. Interviewees suggest some level of central prescription, even if only at the level of minimum expected standards or statutory monitoring of progress. They would like to have accurate and timely national and local-level prevalence data, clear guidance on data protection legislation, advice on developing the CPNA into a strategy and advice on moving from strategy to implementation.

LAs and their partners need to be realistic about their child poverty outcome goals, and to recognise that there is much that they can do to mitigate the effects of poverty. Interviewees' suggestions for achieving this include keeping interventions specific, family focused and manageable; 'child poverty-proofing' all LA strategic plans; self-monitoring and evaluation; and sharing good practice locally and regionally.

## Reference

England and Wales Statutes (2010). *Child Poverty Act*. [online]. Available:[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2010/ukpga\\_20100009\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2010/ukpga_20100009_en_1) [23 March, 2011].

## Further information

For more information about this report visit [www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGCP01/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGCP01/) or email Julie Nelson at [j.nelson@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:j.nelson@nfer.ac.uk).



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