

## Child Poverty - LSE and EPI Roundtable

29 January 2025, London

### Summary Note

As part of a series of roundtables centred around the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, the Education Policy Institute and London School of Economics and Political Science held a roundtable discussing the Government's measures to reduce child poverty in both the Bill and the Child Poverty Strategy, due in spring 2025.

EPI and LSE were joined by expert representatives from the House of Lords, Department for Education, local government, children's charities and think tanks, and the primary education sector representing schools across the UK.

The roundtable was based around a discussion of the Bill, progress on the Child Poverty Strategy, and the incoming Spending Review. It was noted that these three interconnected elements present opportunities to influence the Government's approach, and as such there is a need to create noise and momentum around these issues ahead of the Spring Statement and Spending Review.

### **Guiding Questions**

Participants were invited to consider the following questions:

- To what extent will the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill have an impact on rates of child poverty?
- What impact does child poverty have on other issues the Bill is seeking to address, such as improving attendance and identifying and supporting vulnerable children.
- Are there opportunities within the current scope of the Bill to improve its impact on child poverty?
- How can we move the policy conversation from tackling the effects of poverty to its causes?
- What should the Government do next, once the Bill is passed?
- What role is there for local government and where should related funding best sit?
- What is your key policy priority to tackle the root causes of child poverty?
- What role does the child poverty strategy play and in which areas should it be targeting its efforts?
- The impacts of child poverty and the opportunities to address them are different depending on where a child grows up. What can local approaches offer to tackle poverty? And how can national policy support these efforts?

## Background

**In the last 15 years, child poverty in the UK has been on the rise**, alongside almost yearly cuts to social security. Addressing this situation is a huge task, and while measures such as breakfast clubs are welcome, more is needed to address the long-term trend of rising poverty, at a time when costs and the value for money of each policy recommendation is crucial.

Roundtable participants agreed that there is a need to remember that the Bill's original emphasis, as introduced in the King's Speech, was on children's wellbeing, but focus since has been on the wider education system. Foregrounding wellbeing is important in ensuring that child poverty and its causes are at the top of Government's agenda.

## Schools policy: Breakfast clubs and school uniforms

The Bill plans to introduce free breakfast clubs in schools and limits on branded uniform items. Participants drew attention to several gaps in the Bill's provision:

- A leader of a children's charity offered several examples of where the Bill's terms around breakfast clubs could go further, including: making plans to measure and monitor their delivery; expanding provision to SEND schools; supporting children arriving late; and ensuring that terminology accounts for mixed model approaches that are not "clubs".
- From the primary education sector's perspective, participants questioned the exclusion of secondary schools given the prevalence of teenage hunger and the prioritisation of breakfast over lunch. It was noted that children were most concerned about frequently being late for school and missing this provision, and that children in poverty are more likely to be absent and therefore miss out on any free school meals.
- One primary school head suggested that it would be useful to see case studies modelling breakfast clubs and minimum uniform requirements to ensure schools do not have to rethink existing systems entirely.
- Several participants agreed that further clarification is needed on the Bill's policy intent, particularly around schools. It is unclear, for instance, what the measures targeting academies are trying to achieve.

## Wellbeing and poverty

- Breakfast clubs can support parents who work and rely on a means of affordable and reliable childcare. It was noted that this overlaps with Government ambitions to "get Britain working" and should therefore also include after-school and holiday care, and the expansion of free childcare.
- Connectedly, thought must be given to how a child-centred Bill connects with other welfare issues such as housing and social security. With teachers currently providing extra support, despite many being on low incomes themselves, and the housing crisis leaving many children homeless, the Bill should not be seen in isolation.
- One academic noted that families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) may be excluded from welfare benefits and free childcare. Yet, one third of those entirely dependent on asylum support meet the poverty threshold. Wellbeing provision that is universal in scope should include increases to asylum support and allowing asylum

seekers to work. The point was noted and NRPF status is being considered by the Taskforce.

- It was highlighted that participants' asks around social security and universal provision, which could be applied to the poverty strategy and spending review, should also be applied to the Bill. Although the Bill will reach the Lords before the Child Poverty Strategy is released, amendments can help shift attention away from the wider education system, and back to wellbeing and its antithesis: poverty.

### **Unintended consequences**

- A critique was raised related to the Bill's impact on schools' autonomy. Overly prescriptive legislation, from breakfast clubs to uniform, feel like a one-size-fits-all approach that risks stifling innovation and frustrating local provision that is working well. What schools require most are the resources and capacity to support pupils effectively. Others, however, were supportive of a universal approach, highlighting that not all schools are well-run. Unreasonable levels of discipline for uniform breaches and the costs of uniform at some academies were given as examples of where universal guidance could make a difference.
- There was consensus that schools policy must not become a sticking plaster for underlying poverty as this could expand their existing role as a "fourth emergency service". Poverty must primarily be addressed through investment in social security. It was added that whilst a protective school life is important, the need for a healthy home life should not be ignored.
- It was suggested by a leader in the primary school sector that provision of wrap-around care by schools could impact local childcare markets. However, it was also noted that universal provision of childcare, given the scarcity of local services for some, is a far better solution for parents.

### **Child Poverty Strategy**

- Participants were offered an update on the progress of the Taskforce's review of child poverty. The strategy, which will be published in spring 2025, will then be the responsibility of government departments to deliver on.
- The Taskforce is interested in addressing the causes of poverty and mitigating its effects; employment and social security issues are key to this, alongside the education sector, health care and local government.
- It was clarified that, whilst the Taskforce is preparing a range of options as part of the spending review process, the timing of the autumn Budget means that issues related to social security will likely be decided in the autumn, after the strategy is released in the spring. It is the role of government departments to influence spending commitments, and the Taskforce has been meeting with officials and strategic finance teams to coordinate a strategy for individual departments. Although the Government faces incredibly tough spending decisions, ministers do see child poverty as a priority.
- Participants saw this timeline as a cause for concern, with the possibility that important measures, like the removal of the two-child benefit cap, might be excluded in the first instance from the Strategy. Many were doubtful about the Strategy's ability to tackle child poverty without spending money. It was suggested that a cross-governmental strategy in

the spending review, that includes housing, social security, and other provisions, is needed to comprehensively tackle poverty.

### **Recommendations to the Taskforce:**

Asked what the Taskforce should ask the government for, attendees replied that the Child Poverty Strategy should prioritise:

- **Removal of the two-child limit and the benefit cap.** It was noted that, if absent, this would make it difficult for other measures to succeed and distract from the Strategy's strengths elsewhere.
- Provision of **universal school meals**, and their **extension to secondary schools**. **Further research on the London model and its impacts** would be welcome.
- **Universal provision of other means, such as uniform.** Universality ensures that basic needs are met.
- A **place-based approach** to a poverty strategy that also recognises the importance of innovation and growth.
- **Establishing clear aims and intent** that clarify where the Strategy would like to get to, including clear measures and ambitious targets.
- Better knowledge, and spending, of benefits such as **Pupil Premium Plus**.
- Urgently address **the housing crisis and bed poverty**.
- **Increased investment in social security** and a **properly funded strategy** which acknowledges that child poverty is fundamentally an issue of low income.
- **Investment in family hubs**.

### **Follow up questions for researchers**

- What can we do with a single pupil identifier being proposed? How can we monitor most effectively?
- How can we evaluate the impact of access to breakfast clubs and other proposals, and provide an evidence base to support further action in the future?