

Child of the North APPG: Inaugural Meeting Evidence Session 19 October 2022

Attendees: Emma Lewell-Buck MP (Chair), Mary Robinson MP (Co-Chair), Kim Johnson MP, Mary Glendon MP, Catherine McKinnell MP, Rachael Maskell MP, Sharon Hodgson MP, Mary Foy MP (via Zoom), Kate Pickett (University of York), David Taylor-Robinson (University of Liverpool), Amby Barnes (University of York), Carolyn Snell (University of York), Rachel Loopstra (University of Liverpool), Anna Turley (NE Child Poverty Commission), Amanda Bailey (NE Child Poverty Commission), Rachel Walter (End Child Poverty Coalition) (via Zoom), Sophie Balmer (End Child Poverty Coalition) (via Zoom), Hannah Davies (NHS), Stephen Parkinson (N8 Research Partnership), Chris McHugh (Stephenson-Mohl Group), Rebecca Natton (Emma Lewell-Buck's Office)

Apologies: Ian Byrne MP, Alex Cunningham MP, Liz Twist MP

- ELB opened meeting, confirming that she has been elected as Chair of the APPG, alongside MR as Co-Chair. The work of the APPG will build on the excellent Child of the North report; NHS and N8 will act as secretariat, with Stephenson-Mohl. This first inquiry and evidence session with focus on the Cost of Living crisis and child poverty in the north, with a draft report expected by December 2022.

Child of the North report

- KP and DTR provided an overview of the Child of the North: Building a fairer future after COVID-19 report.
- The report found not just that children in North are more likely to live in poor families, but they have also suffered larger cuts in public services than elsewhere.
- These inequalities contribute to the North-South productivity gap and we need place-based-child focused policies to address these inequalities.
- We know from an understanding of life course effects that the North-South divide in child health also explains the divide in adult health.
- The UK lags behind other wealthy countries in terms of child health, including having the highest mortality rate in under 5s in Western Europe.
- Need to focus on (i) reducing poverty, (ii) proportionate universalism and (iii) an integrated health inequalities strategy, with a focus on children at its heart.

Evidence Session

Dr Carolyn Snell, University of York

- The main drivers of fuel poverty are: energy inefficiency, higher energy bills, and low household income.
- Fuel poverty levels were falling slightly until 2019. There has been no new official data since then, which is in itself problematic.
- Recent developments will increase fuel poverty further. Energy bills have already doubled over the past year and this week's change in the duration of the Energy Price Guarantee support.
- Longstanding trends in fuel poverty – higher rates in the North compared to London/South East/South West.

- Higher rates of fuel poverty amongst single parent households, lower income households, and those living in the rented sector.
- Effects of fuel poverty on children:
 - Increased likelihood of respiratory illness
 - Increased use of health services
 - Impacts on mental health
 - Reduced educational attainment and attendance
 - Lower weight gain among infants
- Projections for 2022-23
 - 6.7m UK households now likely to be in fuel poverty (increase of 2.2m over past year)
 - Substantial increase amongst households with children
 - Regional effects reinforced
 - Substantial increase in rationing, debt
- Addressing fuel poverty
 - Serious increased threat to CYP wellbeing
 - Policy interventions can make a substantial difference:
 - Improve housing, e.g. energy efficiency (also supports net zero ambitions)
 - Reduce bills, e.g. social tariffs/discounts
 - Protect/raise incomes, e.g. uprate benefits

Dr Rachel Loopstra, University of Liverpool

- The pandemic had an enormous effect on people's ability to access food. The Cost of Living crisis has further exacerbated this.
- Food Foundation data on food insecurity since 2020 – rising much faster amongst households with children than without. Part of the explanation could be that government support packages don't take account of size of households.
- Discrepancy between households with and without children is greater in the North than elsewhere in England.
- Indirect effects on children's health due to food insecurity, through such impacts on parental mental health, impact on interactions with other children (e.g. not being able to invite them round for dinner etc.)
- Food insecurity closely linked to many experiences of deprivation.
- Solutions:
 - Ensure children have enough to eat during the school day – expand Free School Meals
 - Support food provisioning for children under school age – e.g. Healthy Start Vouchers
 - Ensure families with children have enough money to meet all their needs – benefits need to match the Cost of Living

Anna Turley, Chair, North East Child Poverty Commission

- Increase in child poverty in the North East since 2015 – now higher than anywhere else in the country (overtaken London)
- Drivers of the rise in child poverty in the North East:
 - Steep increase in in-work poverty (91% increase since 2015)
 - No fall in out-of-work poverty in North East (unlike in rest of country)
 - Rise in numbers of family members unable to work

- Highest proportion of families with: lone parent, parent under 25, families in rented accommodation (outside London)
- Rise in poverty in households with a child under 5 is particularly stark
- Child poverty rate in North East halved between 1999-2015 (50 to 25%). Rises since then means that the gap with the rest of UK is now as large as it's ever been.
- Absolute child poverty is often a preferred government measure, and they often state that it is falling. But it is rising in every local authority area in North East and has risen in all local authorities in the region in every year since 2017.
- Figures quoted are only up to 2020-21. Covid and the Cost of Living crisis are likely to only have made it worse.

Amanda Bailey, Director, North East Child Poverty Commission

- Cost of Living challenges are not a new issue for the North East. The Cost of Living crisis and pandemic has made situation worse. The picture around the region is extremely serious and bleak.
- Unsustainable levels of demand for support for charity services from families, even for the basics. Exacerbated by a fall in donations and volunteers.
- These leads to consequences not just for individual children and families, but for wider public services (e.g. health, education, justice).
- Story from Durham of a child arriving at school without shoes. Also stories of parents watering down evaporated milk to use in bottle feeds because they cannot afford formula. Not attending doctor's appointments because can't afford to travel.
- Schools have reported paying for children's uniform and shoes, and children turning up to school exhausted because they don't have a bed to sleep in.
- Families are turning down the offer of a free boiler as they wouldn't be able to afford to turn it on.
- Terminating unwanted pregnancies because can't afford to have a child.
- Families with a member with a disability are particularly badly affected, because they cannot afford the support requirements.
- Life is simply not sustainable for many lone parent families.
- People living in rented sector unable to implement energy efficiency measures.
- Recommendations
 - Raising social security in line with inflation
 - ?
 - Scrap two child benefit limit
 - Universal Credit sanctions paused for families with children

Sophie Balmer, Youth Ambassador, End Child Poverty Coalition

- Poverty isn't always visible to other people.
- The greatest impact was on my education; missing a meal and feeling hungry throughout the day creates anxiety which, when combined with stress of school, explains the impact on educational attainment/exam results for children living in poverty.
- Even on better days, the worry is still there about what will happen in the future. Even now I am at university and relatively financially secure, the worry doesn't leave you. You feel like you or your parents has done something wrong.
- The End Child Poverty Coalition is running a campaign to get children and young persons' (16-25 year olds) voices heard.

- The government needs to help families like mine. Offering universal Free School Meals and making the holiday food programme permanent would help.

Questions

- (ELB) There appears to be an issue around a lack of up to date data. What is the cause of this and where does the data come from?
 - (CS) Fuel poverty data comes from the ? housing survey. There is always a lag in data, but also understand there are additional delays due to the pandemic.
 - (KP) There is sense that we can't wait for data lags at the moment; and at the University of York we are now trying to collect and analyse data almost in real time. Won't be as rigorous as population wide data, but it can augment it.
 - (AT) Durham County Council are trying to do their own data gathering, on a ward-by-ward or even street-by-street basis.
 - (AB) The North East Child Poverty Commission uses DWP data, which comes out every March. However, this data is always almost a year out of date. Local authorities are also struggling to share data with (and access data from) DWP.
 - (AB) Data on uptake of the Healthy Start vouchers since April is not known, as the relevant Data Sharing Agreement has expired.

Closing Remarks

- MR welcomed the excellent evidence from the North East in this session but noted that it would be good to include evidence from groups, local authorities etc. from other areas in the North as part of the inquiry.
- MF commented that SB was exactly right about the long-term consequences of child poverty and that there is a need to tackle the wider determinants of health.
- ELB thanked everyone for their evidence and looks forward to seeing the draft report in December.

ENDS