

## Parliamentary briefing paper

### Child poverty

In the United Kingdom today, 3.4 million children (27% of all children) are living in poverty.<sup>1</sup> This is a shameful statistic for the fourth richest country in the world. While Barnardo's welcomes and supports the Government's commitment to tackling poverty, we remain concerned that the current strategy will not reach all those in greatest need. For instance, most unemployed people in England live outside the 44 areas targeted by the Government.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the primary focus on work as the main route out of poverty does not help those families for whom work is not an option – either because the jobs are not there, or because they have a disability, health problems, caring duties, or difficulties with child care or transport.

#### The way forward

Barnardo's would like to see all families with enough money to bring up their children, ensuring their health and wellbeing, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 27). In order to prevent and eradicate child poverty, we call on the Westminster Government and, where appropriate, the devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, to do the following:

- To publish as part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review a coherent, cross-departmental strategy which sets out how the government will meet its own targets to end child poverty
- Establish a minimum income standard necessary to maintain good health and the well-being of children. The government to set up an independent commission to conduct research into what constitutes an adequate level of income so that it can make informed decisions as to the level at which benefits, tax credits and the national minimum wage should be set
- Ensure that all initiatives aimed at taking children out of poverty reach the most vulnerable groups of children who are persistently and severely poor throughout their childhoods, such as disabled children, children in large families, children in one parent families, asylum seeking children and some groups of black and minority ethnic children
- Ensure that young people have a comprehensive safety net that ensures an adequate income to fund a reasonable standard of living
- Reform the Social Fund so that it acts as a 'safety net' for the most vulnerable families

Barnardo's would like to see equal emphasis on supporting people who cannot work, with a welfare and benefit system which provides an effective and comprehensive safety net for all, and we would like to see greater emphasis placed on policies and initiatives aimed specifically at those children who live in severe and persistent poverty.

#### Child poverty in the United Kingdom – the facts.

Poverty is the single greatest threat to the wellbeing of children and families living in the UK today. Growing up in poverty can affect every area of a child's development – social, educational and personal. As adults, they are more likely to suffer ill health, be unemployed or homeless, and to become involved in offending, drug and alcohol abuse, and abusive relationships. Certain groups are more vulnerable to poverty: they include lone parents, families from minority ethnic groups, young people, care leavers, families with disabled children, and families with no adults in work.

Children who grow up in poverty are less likely to do well at school, and will have fewer social or sports opportunities than other children. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have poorer school attendance records, are less likely to stay on at school, are 10% more likely to have no qualifications and have poorer literacy and numeracy skills in adulthood.<sup>3</sup>

Living on low income for a long time means children's diet and health can suffer. Poorer families are more likely to live in sub-standard housing and areas with few shops or amenities, where children have little or no space to play safely.<sup>4</sup>

A third of children in poverty in the UK go without meals, or toys, or clothes that they need. For poor families, raising a child is not just about struggling to make ends meet – it's about struggling to give their child a chance to grow and thrive.

Families who are not working, those in low-paid work, often find themselves sinking deeper into debt. This can include owing money to utility companies, loan companies, mail order catalogues as well as the Social Fund. The system of loans offered by the Social Fund results in severe hardship for families when repayments are deducted from already inadequate benefits.

#### **In the UK today:**

- More than a quarter of children (27%) live in poverty.<sup>5</sup>
- The income gap between rich and poor has more than doubled since 1977.<sup>6</sup>
- Almost one in five children (17%) lives in a family where no one works.<sup>7</sup>
- 43% of children in poverty live in lone parent families.<sup>8</sup>
- 61% of children in families with a disabled child are in the bottom 40% of income yet it costs three times more to raise a child with a severe disability than a child without a disability.<sup>9,10</sup>
- 25% of white children live in poverty, compared with 57% of children from Pakistani and Bangladeshi families.

### **The reality for children and young people**

**'I always put the children first. By the time I've done the shopping and paid the bills I have to pay, I have no money left. I'm always skint. I'm struggling to pay for a holiday, it's the first one.'**  
*Parent "The good life?" – The impact of rural poverty on family life in Wales, Barnardo's 2003*

**'Tony never goes without food. If it's a choice of buying food or paying the debt collector, then I will buy food. I was scared to open the door. I was forever wondering when the debt collector would call.'** *Becky*

**'I feel really sad when Ben comes in and says that the children in the street are buying ice-creams from the van and I cannot afford one for him.'**  
*Sarah*

*Invisible children, Barnardo's 2003*

**'I'm skint. I've got to pay my bills and get my shopping and then it's all gone. Sometimes I will skip a bill just to take them**

**swimming.....so we're not stuck in, as this place is such a dump. Six weeks' holiday is the worst.'** *Jenny*

**'You can see the difference when they're on school holidays. As soon as they're on school holidays I have to stock up. When they're at home I have to give them a cooked meal. You're basically skint in the holidays .....especially in the six weeks' holiday, it's awful. You've got six solid weeks. You've got no choice. You've got to feed them...'**  
*Tania*

*Food poverty in the school holidays, Barnardo's 2003*

### **What Barnardo's is doing to help alleviate child poverty**

Barnardo's works to reduce the harmful impact of poverty on children, families and communities across the UK. We do this through community development projects, family centres and a range of services, which enable children, young people and families to lead fuller and happier lives. Around one third of our work across the UK focuses on the alleviation of poverty and it is an inescapable element of nearly all of our 370 services.

#### **▪ Community Development and Anti-poverty work**

We run over 40 community development projects across the UK, where we aim to build up the capacity of local groups and help bring together all relevant agencies to stimulate economic and social regeneration. These schemes assist communities to enhance their own surroundings and help local people to gain skills and confidence and exercise greater control over their lives. Such initiatives create healthier communities and improve life chances for children and families.

#### **▪ Families and young children**

Barnardo's family centres offer parents a place to meet and children a safe and stimulating place to play. Services on offer include day care and play schemes, after school clubs, advice and counselling for parents, parenting education programmes and the opportunity to learn new skills. Barnardo's

centres also help homeless families to sort out housing problems or secure the benefits and grants to which they are entitled.

#### ▪ **Education**

Educational support for children in school is an important part of our services. We work with children from pre-school age to 16+, supporting those with special educational needs and young people who have been, or are at risk of being, excluded from school. We offer support services, both in and out of school – working with families, teachers, social workers and health professionals to enable young people to remain in mainstream education.

#### ▪ **Families with disabled children**

Barnardo's has over 60 services, which provide support to families caring for a child with a disability. Like our family centres, these schemes offer parents a place to meet, get advice and share experiences, as well as a stimulating place for children to play. Many schemes also offer short breaks, where a child is linked with another family for short periods of care away from home. In addition, we have a growing number of schemes working with disabled children from birth through to adulthood, to ensure that they have the same options and opportunities to participate in their communities as non-disabled children.

#### ▪ **Young people**

Barnardo's offers a range of services for young people. We work to tackle youth homelessness, or to prevent it happening in the first place, through housing and welfare advice services, drop-in centres, housing schemes and direct work with young people on the streets. We also run projects which help care leavers towards independent living, offering support and accommodation for young people in the first few years after they have left local authority care.

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