

What children and young people need from the Government's Child Poverty Strategy

This briefing sets out six essential components for an effective Child Poverty Strategy and identifies where gaps remain following recent government announcements | Sept 2025

Summary

- In recent months the government have made **positive steps forward** for children and young people. In June eligibility for free school meals was extended – called a “**down payment**” for the **Child Poverty Strategy** by the Prime Minister.¹ In July the government committed to a much needed £500m investment in family hubs.
- Despite these welcome announcements, on current trajectories, **34% of children in the UK will be in poverty in 2029/30 up from 31% in 2023/24**. Reducing child poverty within this Parliament must be the key focus of the forthcoming Child Poverty Strategy, where even bolder action will be needed.
- The Strategy is expected in November 2025 – the **final 8 weeks provide a critical window** to ensure the manifesto commitment for an ‘ambitious strategy to reduce child poverty’ is delivered.
- On 22 May, Barnardo's [set out six essential elements](#) for the Strategy to deliver transformational change for children. **This briefing provides an update and where further change is needed.**

Essential element	Where are we now?	What needs to happen?
1. Measurement & Accountability	<p>Official statistics for 2023/24 show that almost a third (31%) of children in the UK live in poverty, a rise of 4% since 2020/21.² That's 4.5 million children, three times the entire population of Birmingham.³ Based on existing policies child poverty will reach 34% by 2029-30.⁴</p> <p>Barnardo's research with VotesforSchools found that 64% of the 39,000 secondary and college students who took part want the UK Government to make ending child poverty a top priority.</p>	<p>The government has not confirmed whether the Strategy will include targets or how it will be scrutinised.</p> <p>For the strategy to be meaningful, we believe the Strategy must, as a minimum, deliver a fall in child poverty within this Parliament to 28% (or lower). Alongside this target the Strategy should aim to halve child poverty in 10 years and eradicate it in 20 years.</p> <p>The Strategy also needs a robust accountability framework, with a commitment to lay annual progress reports before Parliament and plans for appropriate scrutiny from a parliamentary committee such as the Public Accounts Committee.</p>
2. Safety Net	<p>The two-child limit restricts the amount of Universal Credit families receive for a third or subsequent child. Families miss out on up to £3,455 per child in 2024/25.⁵ More than half (51%) of children in larger families with 3+ children will be living in poverty in 2028-29 if the policy is not ended.⁶</p>	<p>Ending the two-child limit and benefit cap is the most cost-effective way to reduce child poverty. It would lift 500,000 children out of poverty, reducing child poverty to 28% by 2029-30.⁹ Ending the two-child limit would cost £4.5bn by 2029-30.</p> <p>The Prime Minister has indicated his desire to end the two-child limit.¹⁰ We do not believe it is possible for the Child Poverty Strategy to remain credible if it does not</p>

	<p>The policy interacts closely with the benefit cap which restricts what families receive, affecting 122,000 households - 71% are single parent households.⁷</p> <p>The two-child limit is not widely popular with the public: whilst in recent polling 40% want to keep the policy, 28% oppose it directly and 25% are currently undecided.⁸</p>	<p>urgently end the two child limit and benefit cap or take another action that would deliver a similar impact on family incomes.</p>
<p>3. Tackling Structural Inequalities - racial inequality and families not entitled to social security</p>	<p>Some groups of children are at greater risk of poverty, including those in Black & Asian families, larger families and lone parent families.¹¹</p> <p>One group we are particularly concerned about is migrant children. In 2023, 1 in 3 children living in destitution were migrant children.¹² Destitution is the most severe form of hardship where basic needs such as food, shelter and clothing cannot be met.¹³</p> <p>Half a million children in families in the UK had leave to remain but were subject to the ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’ (NRPF) condition.¹⁴ This policy severely limits household incomes and pushes many children into extreme levels of destitution.¹⁵</p>	<p>The Strategy should include specific metrics, targets and actions to reduce poverty amongst groups of children at greatest risk. This should include strengthening data capture to assess poverty levels better, and introducing specific metrics on measures to track the impact of poverty alleviation initiatives, amongst children and families with the NRPF condition</p> <p>The Strategy must include bold measures to support asylum-seeking and migrant children. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An exemption for families with children under 18 from the NRPF condition. • A commitment to raise the level of asylum support in line with inflation, to ensure it meets the most basic needs of asylum-seeking children and families • Amend statutory guidance (Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023) to strengthen the application of Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to ensure child welfare is consistently prioritised in local authority assessments of destitution & promptly acted upon.
<p>4. Hunger & Poor Nutrition</p>	<p>Our 2025 research found that more than a quarter (26%) of parents had to buy unhealthy food for their children because they couldn’t afford healthy ingredients or meals at least once every fortnight.¹⁶</p> <p>In February 2025, 18% of households with children reported experiencing food insecurity, 5% more than those without children.¹⁷</p> <p>In July 2025 the Education Policy Institute revealed a postcode lottery in enrolment practices for free school meals, leaving many children without free meal provision.¹⁸</p>	<p>In June 2025 the government extended entitlement to free school meals to all children in households in receipt of Universal Credit.¹⁹ This represents a significant step forward for children growing up in poverty.</p> <p>Despite the welcome news, 250,000 eligible children (11%) currently miss out on free school meals.²⁰ Under-registration is due to factors such as complexity of the application process, administrative burden, lack of awareness and stigma.²¹</p> <p>The Child Poverty Strategy should introduce free school meal auto-enrolment to ensure all eligible children receive the support they are entitled to.</p>

5. Support in Every Community	<p>In July 2025 the government announced a welcome initiative to develop and expand the family hubs programme, with a promised investment of £500m over three years to increase the number of family hubs across England to 1000 including ensuring that there is a family hub in every community.</p> <p>These hubs have the potential to provide a range of vital support which can help address some of the impacts of child poverty. Hubs also work to make sure all families can access free activities for children of all ages—from babies to teenagers.</p>	<p>We welcome the government’s commitment to expand the family hubs programme with a particular focus on supporting disadvantaged families. We hope that the commitment will start to re-build the infrastructure of family support across England and will in time expand further to develop a network of over 3,000 hubs – similar to the number of Sure Start Centres open at the height of that programme.</p> <p>The Strategy should outline the key role that new hubs should play in supporting low-income families including the type of services offered would be of particular benefit to those living in poverty. Barnardo’s family centres and hubs offer services such as advice on jobs and benefits, as well as volunteering opportunities that can help parents increase their skills helping them to move into paid employment.</p>
6. Leadership & Focus	<p>As the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office have highlighted in recent reports, cross-government strategies require strong and concerted political leadership to be effective.²²</p>	<p>As the Strategy transitions to delivery, the Prime Minister and Chancellor should lead a new phase of the Child Poverty Taskforce to drive implementation.</p> <p>The Strategy must also set out how it will integrate with other strategic activity (e.g. Child Health Action Plan) and support work undertaken in devolved nations.</p>

Action you can take

Submit the following oral Parliamentary Questions (please get in touch if you can do so):

Prime Minister’s Questions 12.00pm on Wednesday 3rd September (deadline to enter ballot: 12.30pm Thursday 28th August)

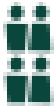
1. Whether he commits to reducing child poverty in this Parliament, and will this target be in the child poverty strategy?
2. Whether he remains committed to the most cost-effective means of reducing child poverty, ending the two-child limit and benefits cap?
3. Will the Prime Minister and Chancellor lead a new phase of the Child Poverty Taskforce to drive delivery of the Child Poverty Strategy?

Home Office Questions Monday 15th September 2.30pm (deadline to enter ballot: 12.30pm Tuesday 9th September)

4. Does she agree that all children in this country deserve a safe and happy childhood, and has her Department included measures in the forthcoming Child Poverty Strategy to support migrant children who make up almost 1 in 3 of all destitute children in this country?
5. Whether her Department is engaging in the Child Poverty Strategy development and will implement an exemption for families with children under 18 from the No Recourse to Public Funds condition?

Education Questions 2.30pm Monday 20th October (deadline to enter ballot: 12.30pm Tuesday 14th October)

1. What steps her Department is taking to ensure robust external scrutiny of the Child Poverty Strategy when it is published later this year?
2. What assessment she has made of the need to end the two-child limit and the benefit cap in the forthcoming Child Poverty Strategy?



Barnardo's support for children in poverty

Helping children and young people in poverty has been a core part Barnardo's work for over 150 years. In response to the cost-of-living crisis we have been providing urgent crisis support to families in our services, including through accessing our 75 children's centres and family hubs.

In the first phase of our crisis response, between October 2022 and August 2024, we supported over 18,560 children, in over 9,875 families. We provided immediate support to help prevent hunger and ensure access to safe and warm spaces. Examples include helping families to afford warm hats and jumpers in the winter, and to replace fridges and washing machines when they break down.

About Barnardo's

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear - changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year, we provided essential support to 356,200 children, young people, parents and carers through 760 services and partnerships across the UK. For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong.

www.barnardos.org.uk

References

- ¹ BBC (2025), '[Free school meals to be extended to 500,000 more children](#)'
- ² Department for Work and Pensions (2025), '[Households Below Average Income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2024, HBAI summary results, Table 1.4b](#)'
- ³ Population of Birmingham in 2021 census was 1 144 900: Office for National Statistics (2022), '[How the population changed in Birmingham: Census 2021](#)'
- ⁴ Resolution Foundation (2025), '[Limited Ambition: An assessment of the rumoured options for easing the two-child limit](#)'
- ⁵ End Child Poverty Coalition: '[Immediate release: two-child limit](#)'
- ⁶ Resolution Foundation (2024), '[Catastrophic Caps, 2024](#)'
- ⁷ Child Poverty Action Group (2025), '[Capped and trapped: why the benefit cap must go](#)'
- ⁸ Public First (May 2025), '[New polling for CPAG on child poverty in the UK](#)'
- ⁹ Resolution Foundation (2025), '[Turning the Tide: What it will take to reduce child poverty in the UK](#)', page 29.
- ¹⁰ The Observer (2025), '[Starmer to scrap two-child benefit cap as Treasury told to find money](#)'.
- ¹¹ See our briefing for further statistics on these groups: Barnardo's (2025), '[Tackling the greatest barrier to opportunity: What young people need from the Government's Child Poverty Strategy](#)'
- ¹² Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023), '[Destitution in the UK 2023](#)', see Table 1.
- ¹³ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2023), '[Destitution in the UK 2023](#)', see Box 1.
- ¹⁴ Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (2025), '[Poverty among children affected by UK government asylum and immigration policy](#)'
- ¹⁵ Praxis (2025), '[Lifting children affected by no recourse to public funds restrictions out of poverty – joint briefing](#)'
- ¹⁶ Barnardo's (2025), '[Nourishing the future](#)'
- ¹⁷ Food Foundation (2025), '[Food insecurity tracker](#)'
- ¹⁸ Education Policy Institute (2025), '[How do free school meal registration practices differ across place and time?](#)'
- ¹⁹ Department for Education (2025), '[Over half a million more children to get free school meals](#)'
- ²⁰ Food Foundation, '[Briefing: Auto-enrol children onto free school meals](#)'
- ²¹ Food Foundation, Fix Our Food, Bremner & Co (2025), '[Briefing: Auto-enrol children onto Free School Meals](#)'
- ²² House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts (2024), '[Cross-government working](#)'. See also: National Audit Office (2023), '[Cross-government working good practice guide for leaders and practitioners](#)'