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TACKLING CHILD POVERTY AND IMPROVING LIFE CHANCES: A NEW APPROACH

Response from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers

February 2011

The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), the education union, is an independent, registered trade union and professional association, representing approximately 160,000 teachers, head teachers, lecturers and support staff in maintained and independent nurseries, schools, sixth form, tertiary and further education colleges in the United Kingdom.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice.

ATL is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). ATL is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

Summary

ATL believes that:

- ♦ Education is about meeting the needs of all children irrespective of their background and constitutes a key route out of poverty;
- ♦ poverty has a strong detrimental impact upon children's educational attainment and well-being;
- ♦ poverty is a form of multiple deprivation which crucially includes economic inequality;
- ♦ the coalition government's economic and fiscal policies will not eradicate nor reduce child poverty rates in the long term; and
- ♦ private sector involvement in state education will lead to unfairness and further disadvantage of vulnerable pupil groups.

In this consultation response, ATL calls on the Government to comply with its statutory duty to institute and consult with an independent Child Poverty Commission without further delay. We also urge the Government to produce a child poverty strategy that:

- ♦ recognises poverty as a complex and multi-faceted problem and comprehensively addresses all the 'building blocks' of poverty (housing; social services; physical and mental health; built or natural environment; and social exclusion)
- ♦ must not take a narrowed approach to eradicating child poverty by downplaying the significance of economic inequality;
- ♦ informs the Government's fiscal approach rather than the reverse;
- ♦ clearly defines a focus on minority groups of children at risk of poverty;
- ♦ sets out a trajectory of progress for meeting the statutory 2020 targets, including year-on-year targets in relation to the range of building blocks of socio-economic disadvantage;

- ◆ recognises and tackles women's poverty and in-work poverty;
- ◆ moves away from a concentration on individuals in poverty towards a more in-depth understanding and acknowledgement of the institutional and structural barriers that disproportionately lock specific groups of people into a cycle of poverty;
- ◆ makes provision for a ring-fenced and inflation-protected early intervention grant; and
- ◆ is based on a firm commitment to high-quality public services, including properly funded state-maintained education and adult and community learning.

ATL Response

ATL fully supports initiatives aimed at tackling disadvantage and inequality in all their manifestations. Education is about meeting the needs of every child, supporting pupils' well-being and ensuring that all children and young people can achieve their potential, irrespective of their background.

We welcome the Government's consultation on its proposed approach to ending child poverty and improving life chances. This consultation is not only timely and important but also supports the Government's requirement under the Child Poverty Act 2010 to publish a national child poverty strategy by March this year.

More than 70% of respondents to an ATL survey on child poverty (2007) said that poverty has a major impact on the educational performance of children.¹ This reinforces research findings which show a clear correlation between socio-economic disadvantage and low educational attainment even after controlling for measures of family background, such as parental education, and a child's ability.² Low educational attainment from an early age generally leads to fewer qualifications, leaving school earlier, limited employment and career progression prospects, and restricted opportunities to participate and contribute to society (social exclusion). As a result, growing up in poverty, the effects of which can be amplified by additional disadvantage, for example, due to ethnic background, disability or English as an additional language, is the single most important aspect of early childhood which has the greatest influence on children's life chances, particularly with regard to education, health, housing and well-being.³

In ATL's view, it is crucial, therefore, that the Government's child poverty strategy demonstrates a firm commitment and clear approach to abolishing child poverty and breaking the link between poverty, low educational outcomes and reduced life chances. Government statistics show that in 2008/09, 3.9 million children, or nearly one-third, were living in poverty. This means that the UK has one of the worst child poverty rates amongst OECD countries.⁴

The institution of a Child Poverty Commission

ATL believes that any consultation on the UK child poverty strategy would have been crucially enhanced by the establishment of a Child Poverty Commission as required by the Child Poverty Act 2010. The Act states that when preparing a UK child poverty strategy, the Secretary of State "must request the advice of the Commission" and must also "have regard to any advice given by the Commission".⁵

ATL notes with great concern that the Government appears to be in breach of child poverty legislation through its failure to date to set up this Commission. We urge the Government to establish a Child Poverty Commission as soon as possible as a matter of compliance with statutory requirements and to consult with this body in retrospect on a UK child poverty strategy. At the same time, ATL disagrees very strongly with the Government's intention to review "the plans to establish a Child Poverty Commission".⁶ The Child Poverty Bill received cross-party support and the legislation was ultimately passed in its existing format. ATL does

not believe that this is the time to review any of the provisions within the Child Poverty Act, especially as none of the possible reasons for a review at this time could be based on any evidence of lack of effective performance.

Furthermore, we are extremely concerned that a much welcome focus on the underlying causes of poverty seems to be driven primarily by ideological differences between the previous and the current government. ATL does not agree that a focus on the causes of poverty can replace clear and unmistakable government policies and actions to reduce the ever-increasing income gap between the rich and poor in the UK. We believe that the UK needs a broad and all-encompassing child poverty strategy that includes action on reducing economic inequality without privileging any one aspect, or building block, of poverty as a complex and multi-faceted problem over another.

Child poverty includes educational disadvantage, poor housing, inability to participate in extra-curricular and after-school activities, health problems, including mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, poor nutrition, lack of adequate clothing and access to transport, individual and institutional discrimination, and an inability to participate in social and leisure activities. Furthermore, the stigma of poverty has a particular detrimental impact on children who generally do not want to be seen as different from their peers.⁷ The remit of the Child Poverty Commission can easily be adjusted to include a focus on and relevant targets in tackling the causes as well as the various manifestations, or building blocks, of poverty beyond income.

ATL deems it wholly unacceptable that proposals for a review of the establishment of a Child Poverty Commission are couched in terms of the Coalition Government's reform programme of public bodies which stipulates that these bodies "must serve a useful purpose and provide value for money".⁸ While the evaluative standards against which the Government measures the performance of public bodies in meeting these criteria are somewhat obscure, ATL would maintain that you cannot reform a public body which does not yet exist.

There is also a certain irony in the premise that any action to tackle, or indeed eradicate, child poverty must be 'value for money' which suggests that the underlying motives are predominantly economic rather than stemming from a concern for equality, fairness and social justice. We believe that child poverty rates can be reduced by governments with a firm commitment to this objective. Reducing child poverty in itself brings significant social and economic benefits. It is estimated that child poverty costs the UK at least £25 billion a year.⁹ There is no further requirement to subject individual anti-poverty measures to a cost-benefit analysis.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has cited research which shows the difference that can be made through political commitment and decisive action. Between 1997 and 2001, relative poverty levels fell by around one million, including half a million children. This was largely attributable to rising levels of employment and above inflation increases in some benefits, particularly for families with children, and thus the successful combination of anti-poverty measures.¹⁰ ATL understands that the economic recession has not necessarily been conducive to either of these measures, but we remain unconvinced that the Coalition Government's tax and benefit reforms will have a beneficial impact on reducing and eradicating child poverty rates in the UK.

Tackling child poverty within the context of the Coalition Government's fiscal policies

The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) has produced an analysis of the Coalition Government's tax and benefit reforms which forecasts that none of these reforms will lead to any noticeable difference in absolute and relative child poverty rates in 2011-12. Furthermore, by 2013-2014, as the analysis shows, both absolute and relative poverty can each be expected

to rise by 100,000 children. In order to meet the target of the Child Poverty Act to reduce the rate of relative child poverty to 10% by 2020-21, the Government would need to reduce the child poverty rate by 10.5 percentage points after 2013-14. The IFS points out that this sort of reduction has never been achieved over any period of time since the monitoring of consistent series began in 1961.¹¹

Similarly, the Scottish Government, in preparation of its own statutory child poverty strategy, has noted the potentially detrimental impact of the Westminster Government's fiscal policies, including reforms to the welfare system and reduced spending on public services, on the reduction and eradication of poverty, and in particular of child poverty in Scotland.¹²

Objections to the Coalition Government's fiscal policies have included the contentious identification of the economic crisis as a spending rather than a revenue crisis and the disproportionate impact of the spending cuts on the poorest households. Calculations by the TUC have shown that the poorest tenth of households will experience a loss of income and services equivalent to 20.3% of their income, while the richest of households would only experience a loss of around 1.5% as a result of the cuts.¹³ The IFS has also demonstrated that the biggest beneficiaries of the change in the income tax personal allowance are households of working age *without* children in the upper half of the UK's income distribution.¹⁴

The cumulative effect of spending cuts and tax and benefit reforms means that the poorest will be hit six times harder and that around 75% of the burden will be borne by women.¹⁵ We have already argued in our submission to the Field Review that child poverty is intrinsically linked with women's poverty. 42% of poor children live in a household headed by a lone parent and 90% of lone-parent households are headed by women.¹⁶ Furthermore, about 59% of poor children live in a household where at least one adult works.¹⁷ ATL would therefore strongly welcome a child poverty strategy which explicitly recognises both women's poverty and in-work poverty.

A comprehensive child poverty strategy, in our view, would address any barriers to women's gainful employment, such as the lack of affordable childcare, caring responsibilities for one or more children with a disability, a right to a range of flexible working arrangements, the closing of the gender pay gap and the proliferation of insecure and exploitative jobs. It would also seek to ensure a living wage for the worst off as well as appropriate training and career pathways for low-skilled workers and/or low earners, taking into account the findings by the Institute of Public Policy Research (ippr) that the risk of in-work poverty is greater for households from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds.¹⁸

Disadvantaged families in employment are regularly forced to work longer and more unsociable hours which creates increased childcare costs. Their employment status means disqualification from claiming most benefits; and even those with the lowest wages can face such a sharp downturn in benefit eligibility that it actually costs them money to work, especially once travel and clothing costs are taken into account. This is why it is vital to develop at the very least a 100% subsidy of childcare costs for disadvantaged families, particularly in view of the Government's emphasis on work as a route out of poverty.¹⁹

In our response to the Field Review, we have also argued that a poverty measure should include fixing poverty thresholds on a measure of living standards, such as the minimum income standard researched annually by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF). It is noteworthy, according to the JRF's research, that in order to afford a basic but acceptable standard of living in 2010, a couple with two children needed an annual income of about £29,000.²⁰ This is well above the annual income threshold for families whose children are eligible for free school meals which currently stands at £16,190. ATL would welcome the inclusion of a measure of living standards into the forthcoming child poverty strategy, although this may fundamentally conflict with the Government's fiscal approach.

ATL believes that it is disingenuous to seek to consult only on measures to eradicate child poverty and improve life chances that are compatible with the Government's existing fiscal approach.²¹ In our view, this is tantamount to prejudging any arguments not on the strength of evidence but on the grounds of preference.

The importance of public services

An emphasis on employment as the main route out of poverty, in our view, is not only contentious at a time of public and private sector redundancies, but it also ignores the inflexibility of the labour market, for example, in providing adequate jobs for people with disabilities and/or those with caring responsibilities. Public services play a key role in alleviating hardship and reducing poverty, including child poverty, and it is important that their role and contributions to a more cohesive and fairer society are neither eroded nor undermined through deep and unsustainable cuts.

ATL welcomes the acknowledgement within the consultation document of the importance of income as well as of the need for access to high quality public services as a critical factor for improving the life chances of disadvantaged families and their children.²² We are much encouraged that this admission should now lead to a review and reversal of the Coalition Government's economic and fiscal policies and urgently call for the reversal of budget cuts for local authorities, which are, for example, putting 250 children's centres and more than 400 libraries at risk of closure and threatening effective SEN provision in schools as well as support services for a range of disadvantaged pupil groups.²³

The Government's proposal of an Early Intervention Grant recognises the importance of the need to tackle poverty and disadvantage in the early years of a child's life in order to improve future life chances. We are extremely pleased with this focus on the early years and expect that the Early Intervention Grant will not only be ring-fenced but also represent an uprated or inflation-proofed combination of previously available funding streams for the sector. Children with three years of high quality early years provision have been shown to be a year ahead in terms of cognitive and social skills by the time they start formal education. The best and most effective early years provision is found in socially mixed settings, which we believe is testimony to the strength and success of the state-maintained sector and a clear indication of the need for and value of well-resourced public services.

ATL recommends the abandoning of the disproportionate emphasis on private sector providers if the Government is serious about meeting the 2020 child poverty targets as defined in the Child Poverty Act. Private sector providers work on the basis of profit maximisation and seek to compete on costs, often to the detriment of service quality and the promotion of greater equality and fairness within society.²⁴

Within the education sector, private providers are free to determine their own terms and conditions, which can create uncertainty and division amongst staff, and are not obliged to ensure that their staff hold relevant professional qualifications.²⁵ Understanding how children and young people develop and recognising the impact of a range of factors, including socio-economic disadvantage, on pupils' progress and well-being is a core requirement of obtaining a recognised professional qualification such as qualified teacher status (QTS).

Given the proliferation of different types of schools as well as the 'freedom' of free school providers to hire education staff who do not hold QTS, ATL is concerned about the lack of any explicit safeguards to support the most vulnerable and disadvantaged pupil groups both within a range of educational providers as well as with regard to equality of access to well-resourced local schools offering a broad and balanced education. Such safeguards should go beyond the payment of a pupil premium for poor children by ensuring that all education staff are fully trained and supported in recognising and addressing the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on educational attainment.

Furthermore, we are extremely concerned at recent reports that at least fifteen free school groups have been given or promised capital funding by the Government to acquire their school buildings. The cost of one project alone is already estimated at £15million which would leave a balance of £35million within the Department for Education's (DfE) original free schools budget. Apart from the fact that the model schools for the Government's free school policy in the United States and Sweden respectively either lease their buildings or receive no state funding, the apparent budget deficit raises some urgent questions about how the DfE intends to finance the remaining projects.²⁶ ATL believes that this money would have been better spent, for example, in support of the pupil premium which, in England, currently only amounts to an extra £430 per pupil from a disadvantaged background and comes from within the existing education budget.²⁷

ATL is also deeply concerned that the free schools policy has not been proven so far to benefit a majority of pupils, and in particular the most disadvantaged, nor do we agree that it principally "enables communities" to set up their own schools.²⁸ A significant proportion of free school proposers have an executive level background in either banking, finance, media or marketing, or they represent faith groups, specific teaching methods or established educational charities which already run academies. Furthermore, there does not appear to be sufficient evidence to suggest that free school proposals are targeted at disadvantaged communities. Unlike state-maintained community schools, there are strong indications that free schools disproportionately enable specific, more assertive and better off sections of the 'community' to realise their own ideals and aspirations.

A Trajectory of progress to 2020 and the 'building blocks' of socio-economic disadvantage

While the consultation document provides a fairly detailed overview of the Government's immediate steps and 'new approach' to tackling child poverty, ATL is concerned about the absence of any trajectory of progress in reducing child poverty to the levels defined in the Child Poverty Act for 2020. We believe that clearly defined year-on-year targets are vital not only for the Government to meet its statutory obligations under the Act but also to ensure the transparency and accountability of Government policies.

ATL strongly disagrees with the Coalition Government's interpretation of its obligations under the Child Poverty Act which suggests that the publication of a strategy outlining the steps towards the statutorily defined income targets, covering both absolute and relative low income, persistent poverty and combined low income and material deprivation, can be abandoned in favour of a 'broader approach' which tackles the underlying causes of intergenerational disadvantage.²⁹ We do not consider this to constitute a broader approach unless it also includes a strategy which addresses the income targets under the Act.

Apart from the publication of year-on-year targets, ATL also believes that the child poverty strategy should reflect tangible action on a wide range of factors which have been identified as the 'building blocks' of socio-economic disadvantage such as parental employment and skills, financial support for children and parents, information, advice and assistance to parents, health, education and social services, housing, the built and natural environment and the promotion of social inclusion.

At present, there appears to be a disproportionate and almost singular focus in the consultation document on the role of families and the home environment. Yet, even within this approach, the need to tackle poverty-related stress and mental health problems, for example, is barely acknowledged in the Government's proposals. Parental education has also been shown to affect the home learning environment (HLE), and we would urge the Government to support parents and communities by promoting a learning society, that is, by placing an emphasis on and making sustained provision for lifelong learning.

ATL is extremely concerned about the impact of cuts to adult and community education in favour of the redirection of funds to vocational training for business and industry. 1.5 million adult and community education places in England have already disappeared between 2006 and 2009.³⁰ The progressive loss of adult and community learning undermines universal access to education, particularly of those who are out of work or struggle to find employment and has a direct impact on the HLE and the life chances of children.³¹

We applaud the Coalition Government's commitment to reform and protect adult and community learning and hope that any reforms will be based on retaining the breadth of the curriculum and a wider approach to study which is not simply about return-to-work initiatives with college funding being tied to employment outcomes.³² ATL would welcome specific information on what constitutes a 'more responsive system', in particular whether this responsiveness is focused on the needs and preferences of disadvantaged individuals, families or communities or those of business and industry.

We are also concerned that there is no clear identification of vulnerable groups in the consultation document, including the explicit recognition of the needs of disabled children or parents, which was a key criticism by the Liberal Democrats of the Child Poverty Bill.³³ ATL has also previously recommended that the definition of socio-economic disadvantage should include a measure of the risk of poverty in order to ensure that the well-being and life chances of minority groups of children, such as looked after children, refugee and asylum-seeking children and children from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller backgrounds who may not be picked up on in official data sets on child poverty, are adequately protected and advanced by the child poverty strategy.

Respondents to the ATL survey on child poverty have commented on the detrimental impact of poor housing on pupils' educational attainment. It was noted that how the lack of a quiet study space in overcrowded accommodation, often compounded by inadequate heating, affected pupils' learning from very early on in their educational experience.³⁴ Research has shown that children living in poor housing are nearly twice as likely as other children to leave school without any GCSEs and that homeless children miss out on a quarter of their schooling.³⁵

ATL believes that there is a pressing need for a sustained programme of providing high quality social housing. We do not, however, agree with the Government's plans to devolve power to local authorities and communities to ensure the availability of more social housing, particularly in view of reduced local authority budgets and national cuts of around £220 million to the Homes and Communities Agency and a further £150 million to the National Affordable Housing Programme. Shelter estimates that the combined reduction in housing capital investment of up to £370 million in 2010/11 will lead to 6,150 fewer homes being built, 9,200 job losses and a cost of £1.3 billion to the economy.³⁶ We think that ensuring provision of affordable and high quality social housing is the responsibility of national Government and should be a key component of the UK child poverty strategy.

ATL would also welcome an official poverty threshold which measures actual living standards *after* housing costs as well as an explicit recognition of the impact of community deprivation, or living in the most deprived areas in the UK, and the challenges arising from the 'hidden' poverty in rural areas in the child poverty strategy.³⁷

Unlocking social mobility

The emphasis on 'unlocking social mobility' is a much welcome aspiration, yet we doubt whether the Government will achieve its vision by merely focusing on improving opportunities rather than also trying to "correct and compensate for problems that have already occurred".³⁸ ATL believes that disadvantaged families experience a range of

societal and structural barriers based on stigmatisation, prejudice and discrimination, together with the dominant assumption that poverty is the result of an individual's 'failings' and that it is the responsibility of the individuals concerned to lift themselves out of poverty.

ATL shares the United Nations Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (2001) definition of poverty as *"a human condition characterised by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights."* This understanding of poverty relates not only to the socio-economic standards of a particular society at a particular time but it is also intrinsically linked with inequality. Poverty, therefore, is a form of multiple deprivation rather than just material deprivation, which includes severe and chronic disadvantage, for example, in relation to education, health, housing, representation, and decision-making. It requires a need for broader social changes in addition to increasing the income of the worst-off members of society to eliminate poverty.

It is vital, in our view, that an effective child poverty strategy moves away from a concentration on individuals in poverty towards a more in-depth understanding and acknowledgement of the institutional and structural barriers that disproportionately lock specific groups of people, often based on certain attributes such as gender, ethnic background, disability, age, family status, sexual orientation and religion or belief, into a cycle of poverty. For example, women tend to be concentrated in less secure, part-time and often limited and low-paid employment, disabled people consistently struggle to access the labour market, and poverty and unemployment rates are particularly high among Bangladeshi and Pakistani families. It is also well documented that low income families face a 'poverty premium' in taxes and basic services of more than £1,280 per year, and that this premium has risen by over £280 since 2007.³⁹

A disproportionate focus on individuals in poverty, as implied by the Government's emphasis on social mobility, also tends to develop a bias towards urban areas with a greater concentration of poor families and obscures the significant, persistent and no less severe problem of rural poverty. ATL believes that a systematic focus on social class rather than the Government's current emphasis on social mobility would lead to a more comprehensive and effective strategy which addresses both the causes and manifestations of child poverty.⁴⁰

In our view, the Government needs to take some very fundamental steps to create a social framework for any anti-poverty initiatives at familial, local and community level to succeed. This could be done, for example, through the rigorous implementation of the public sector equality duties and socio-economic duty under the Equality Act 2010 and greater investment in universal child benefits and tax credits which are cheap to administer and without stigma, and which do not create any poverty or employment traps and provide a reliable source of income for the worst off. A reformed tax system would simultaneously ensure that universal benefits are effectively removed from those who do not need them.

Conclusion

Poverty has a strong detrimental impact upon children's educational attainment, well-being and life chances. ATL believes that the Government's child poverty strategy needs to acknowledge and recognise poverty as a complex and multi-faceted problem and comprehensively address all its 'building blocks', including economic inequality, education and skills, childcare, support for parents, housing, social services, physical and mental health, built or natural environment, and social exclusion.

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Endnotes:

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