

## ASSOCIATION OF TEACHERS AND LECTURERS

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### ***SOCIAL MOBILITY AND CHILD POVERTY REVIEW***

#### ***A Cabinet Office Call for Evidence***

*Submission from the Association of Teachers and Lecturers*

*October 2011*

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. AMiE is the trade union and professional association for leaders and managers in colleges and schools, and is a distinct section of ATL. We recognise the link between education policy and members' conditions of service.

ATL exists to help members, as their careers develop, through first rate research, advice, information and legal advice. Our evidence-based policy making enables us to champion good practice and to campaign and negotiate locally and nationally.

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.

### **ATL Response**

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.<sup>1</sup> ATL believes very strongly that urgent action is required to break the link between poverty and reduced life chances and to stop the waste of talent of millions of poor children and young people in the UK through persistent inequality and lack of opportunity.<sup>2</sup>

ATL believes that education is about meeting the needs of all children and young people irrespective of their background. Over 70% of respondents to an ATL survey on child poverty, however, said that poverty has a major impact on the educational performance of children.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 and housing.<sup>5</sup>

ATL welcomes this Social Mobility and Child Poverty review which seeks to make recommendations on appropriate actions to tackle child poverty. Based on our earlier submissions to the [Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances](#) and the [Child Poverty Strategy](#) consultations, we would like to take this opportunity to re-state some of our earlier views and concerns, including that:

- poverty is a form of multiple deprivation, which includes severe and chronic disadvantage, for example, in relation to work and income, education, health, housing, representation, participation, and decision-making;
- effective action to eradicate poverty, including child poverty, requires social transformation;
- the biggest barrier to social mobility, when defined as 'moving out of poverty', is inequality;
- the Government's disproportionate focus on individuals cannot be supported by statistical evidence about households in poverty;
- there is an urgent need for a thorough and critical appraisal of any policies around welfare and poverty for implicit elements of 'povertyism';
- the Government's anti-poverty policies must address unemployment, in-work poverty, the continuing lack of support for those with caring responsibilities and/or disabilities and welfare provision as a matter of urgency;
- the Government's social mobility and child poverty strategies are flawed and that the Government's fiscal policies have a serious detrimental impact on the poorest households;
- we disagree very strongly with the premise that the budget for anti-poverty initiatives should be determined by the overall performance of the financial markets;
- well-resourced public services provision plays a key role in alleviating hardship and reducing poverty; and
- the indicators of a child poverty strategy must make explicit reference to a more nuanced 'measure' of poverty.

### **What do you think are the links between social mobility and child poverty?**

ATL shares the definition by the United Nations Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights (2001) 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, which includes severe and chronic disadvantage, for

example, in relation to work and income, education, health, housing, representation, participation, and decision-making.

Based on a recognition of poverty as a complex and multi-faceted problem rooted in economic inequality, effective action to eradicate child poverty requires broader social changes. Limiting these changes to promoting 'social mobility', in our view, is not only insufficient but also misleading. A notion of social mobility assumes that there will always be some 'at the top' and 'at the bottom' of a hierarchical social and economic order. Anti-poverty campaigners, however, do not seek worsened living conditions, or a slip into poverty, for the better off, but to make a moral and economic case for equality and social transformation.

ATL agrees with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that it is not social mobility but *inequality*, including the lack of opportunity, which is in fact the most pressing issue in relation to child poverty.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore vital for a Government committed to the eradication of child poverty to be clear in its ambitions and to communicate its intentions in unambiguous terms.

### **What are the main barriers which stop people moving out of poverty or which prevent people from slipping into poverty?**

ATL considers this question to suggest a disproportionate focus on individuals, which cannot be supported by statistical evidence about households in poverty.<sup>7</sup> A narrow emphasis on individuals in poverty ignores the structural inequalities which lead to a greater proportion of socio-economic disadvantage amongst specific groups of people, such as people from minority ethnic backgrounds, people with disabilities and/or caring responsibilities for disabled relatives, the elderly, or lone parents.<sup>8</sup>

A focus on individuals in poverty, as implied by the 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.<sup>9</sup> ATL believes that a systematic focus on social class rather than 'social mobility' would lead to a more effective strategy against poverty, which encompasses a focus on inequality and thus addresses both the causes and manifestations of poverty.

Although there are no clearly identifiable barriers which prevent people from slipping into poverty, it could be argued that the very barriers which stop people from moving out of poverty inadvertently make it less likely for those who do not already share any of the experiences or characteristics of low-income or unemployed households from slipping into poverty. The biggest barrier to social mobility, when defined as 'moving out of poverty', is inequality as a result of both structural and individual discrimination.

In order to tackle the barriers which trap people in poverty, ATL believes it is important to begin with an acknowledgement of 'povertyism' within our society. Povertyism consists of fairly widespread social attitudes that denigrate the poor and undermine popular support for anti-poverty policies.<sup>10</sup> It also draws distinctions between what are regarded as the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor, implying stigmatisation and a link of poverty to individual 'failings' rather than economic inequality and discrimination.<sup>11</sup> We would recommend a thorough and critical appraisal of any discourse and policies around welfare and poverty for implicit elements of povertyism.

ATL also believes that some very fundamental steps need to be taken by the Government to create an enabling framework for any anti-poverty initiatives at familial, local and national level to succeed. This includes the need to address:

- *Unemployment:* Unemployment in the UK currently stands at 7.9% with predictions of a further rise to due the recession. ATL calls on the Government to protect public sector jobs and to promote economic growth policies. Discrimination in access to jobs and career progression must be tackled through the rigorous implementation and application of the Equality Act 2010, and there should be a comprehensive, well-resourced and appropriately remunerated system of apprenticeships.
- *In-work poverty:* Some 59% of children live in a household where at least one adult works.<sup>12</sup> With the proliferation of insecure and exploitative jobs, low-income families 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 families money to work, especially once travel and clothing costs are taken into account. ATL calls on the Government to ensure a living wage and training and career pathways for low skilled workers and/or low earners and part-time workers, taking into account the findings by the Institute of Public Policy Research (ippr) that the risk of in-work poverty is even greater for households from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds.<sup>13</sup>
- *The continuing lack of support for those with caring responsibilities and/or disabilities:* 42% of poor children live in a household headed by a lone parent and 90% of lone-parent households are headed by women.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, more than a million children living in poverty are affected by disability, either by being disabled and/or having a disabled parent.<sup>15</sup> ATL calls on the Government to provide a legal entitlement to flexible working for parents, appropriate and easily accessible support for households with disabilities, more effective measures to achieve equal pay, and high-quality and affordable childcare with a 100% subsidy of childcare costs for the poorest households.
- *Welfare provision, including tax and benefit reforms:* The cumulative effect of Government spending cuts and recent tax and benefit reforms means that the poorest households are hit six times harder and that around 75% of the burden will be borne by women.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> The Institute of Fiscal Studies (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.<sup>18</sup> Further tax increases and benefit cuts from 2012, by contrast, include, according to the IFS, more stringent testing of claims for the Disability Living Allowance and more aggressive means-testing for the family element of the Child Tax Credit.<sup>19</sup> ATL calls on the Government to ensure a fair system of tax and benefits, including disability benefits, which must be more easily accessible and adequately support the most vulnerable.

**Do you think the Government's policies, in particular the social mobility and child poverty strategies, will improve people's life chances?**

The social mobility and child poverty strategies must be considered within the context of the Government's economic and fiscal policies. ATL believes that these strategies as well as Government's fiscal policies have serious shortcomings. We have already expressed serious concerns over the Government's contentious identification of the economic crisis as a spending rather than a revenue crisis, and over the disproportionate impact of the spending cuts on the poorest households.<sup>20</sup>

The 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.<sup>21</sup>

An emphasis on employment as the main route out of poverty, in ATL's view, is not only contentious at a time of widespread public and private sector job losses, 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.

With a child poverty and social mobility strategy being determined by the Government's economic and fiscal policies, it comes of little surprise therefore that there is no trajectory of progress within the child poverty strategy for reducing child poverty levels in line with the statutory 2020 targets of the Child Poverty Act, including year-on-year targets in relation to the range of building blocks of socio-economic disadvantage.

**Are there other policies that could be implemented for the same cost which would ensure that all citizens have the same opportunities?**

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has cited research indicating the difference that can be made to poverty rates within a society through political commitment and decisive action. Between 1997 and 2001, for example, 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 to a successful combination of different anti-poverty measures.<sup>22</sup> ATL understands that the economic recession has not been conducive to either of these measures, but we remain deeply unconvinced that the Government's spending cuts can possibly have any beneficial impact on reducing and eradicating poverty rates in the UK.

ATL further believes that it is inappropriate to restrict the budget for tackling poverty and improving life chances within a society characterised by a growing wealth and income divide, and particularly at a time when low-income households

are hit hardest by the effects of the recession. ATL strongly disagrees with the premise that the budget for anti-poverty initiatives must be determined by the performance of the financial markets.

Seeking to establish 'other policies that could be implemented for the same cost' is an admission, in our view, that existing anti-poverty policies are not only affected by Government spending cuts, but that they are also unlikely to deliver. ATL believes that the size of the budget, including the resources allocated to public services provision, which plays a key role in alleviating hardship and reducing poverty, remains the key concern. We 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.<sup>23</sup>

Reducing poverty, including child poverty, is not a business transaction subject to a cost-benefit calculation, but it is a matter of social justice. ATL believes that 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.<sup>24</sup> There is no further requirement to subject individual anti-poverty measures to a cost-benefit analysis.

### **How can we create the right mix of practical and financial support to ensure that all people have opportunities to get on in life?**

ATL believes that any discussion over the right mix of practical and financial support to improve life chances must not imply that practical support can somehow substitute for financial support. Inequality of income, wealth and power is at the root of poverty, and we are extremely concerned about any tendency within Government policies to deflect attention away from tackling economic inequality.

In particular, ATL is concerned that relevant financial support for disadvantaged families has already been significantly reduced or stopped. The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), for example, which has been found to act as a clear incentive for disadvantaged young people to stay on in education, was scrapped by the Government at the beginning of the year.<sup>25</sup> EMA has now been replaced with a 16-19 Bursary which operates as a 'discretionary fund' for schools and colleges to support a small group of vulnerable teenagers and those deemed by their institutions to be of 'most need'.<sup>26</sup> The £180million Bursary has seen a reduction of more than half of the original EMA funding which stood at £560million. Under EMA arrangements, children eligible for free school meals were entitled to the full EMA allowance of £1,170, yet the IFS estimates that under the Bursary scheme their entitlement would drop on average by £370 a year.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, ATL has already noted that with significant local autonomy at school, college or training provider level, it is difficult to avoid the risk that there will be major variations between institutions in relation to the financial thresholds that are used to determine eligibility and entitlement levels at which the Bursary will be paid. It is almost inevitable that this will lead to a kind of post-code lottery that will see many learners disadvantaged and may deter some young people from remaining in education.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, we have serious concerns over financial support pledged to disadvantaged pupils such as the Pupil Premium which currently only amounts to

£430 per pupil and does not represent any additional funding for schools as their budgets following the current funding settlement have not risen above inflation and are not expected to rise in real terms over the next four years.<sup>29</sup>

Free school meals, which provide a healthy source of nutrition and are linked to better concentration and improved educational outcomes, are another example of practical and financial support for disadvantaged families. The Children's Food Campaign estimates that to a family with three eligible children, free schools meals are worth around £1,100. At present, however, families which had previously been entitled to free school meals due to their receipt of out of work benefits generally lose their entitlement once they move into work.<sup>30</sup> ATL urgently calls on the Government to ensure that all children from low-income households are entitled to free school meals and that any stigma and discrimination as a result of accessing free school meals is removed through the universal provision of free school meals.

Overall, ATL believes that the Government can only create the right mix of practical and financial support to ensure that all people have opportunities to get on in life by investing in public services. Within education, for example, state-maintained early years provision, which is central to improving the educational outcomes and life chances of disadvantaged children, has been shown to be the most effective and consistently high-quality form of provision. ATL urges the Government to abandon the disproportionate emphasis on private sector providers in education as well as in other areas of public life.

### **What would be the best way to measure progress on social mobility and child poverty?**

ATL continues to believe that the best way to measure progress on reducing child poverty is to produce a child poverty strategy which outlines the steps towards meeting the statutorily defined income targets, covering both absolute and relative low income, persistent poverty and combined low income and material deprivation.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from the publication of year-on year targets, ATL also believes that the child poverty strategy should identify tangible action on a wide range of factors which have been described 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.

Although the current child poverty strategy proposes some policies, the link between these policies and specific outcomes under the different building blocks is often unclear, and some building blocks, or indicators, appear to have been entirely ignored. Measuring progress on ending child poverty is best achieved, in our view, by a child poverty strategy which is rooted in an acknowledgement of and a commitment to tackling the financial crisis of low-income families as a result of the economic recession, rising inflation, and the Government's spending cuts.<sup>32</sup>

### **Do you think the indicators set out in the child poverty strategy and social mobility strategy are the right measures?**

ATL believes that some of the indicators set out in the child poverty strategy are broadly the right measures, but we note with extreme concern that a number of indicators are absent from the strategy, such as mental health, disabilities, housing, participation, poor nutrition beyond low birth weight, lack of access to transport and

discrimination. We also find that a great emphasis is placed on research to strengthen our understanding of society. ATL disagrees with the Government's premise that there is currently a lack of such social research, and we are unclear about the evidence in support of the Government's need for 'new' or additional research.

The official definition of the poverty line in Britain is a household income of less than 60 per cent of the contemporary median household income, but this measure fails to take into account any housing and childcare costs, the household size, or any explicit standard of living.<sup>33</sup> ATL believes that the indicators of a child poverty strategy must make explicit reference to a more nuanced 'measure' of poverty which includes:

- fixing poverty thresholds on a measure of living standards, such as the minimum income standard researched annually by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation;<sup>34</sup>
- an audit of inequality and discrimination, based on stereotypes and prejudices, which disadvantage some groups of people living in poverty even further, such as families from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, children in care, children of refugee and asylum-seeking parents and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, parents with disabilities and/or children with disabilities, and lone parent households, in particular those headed by (young) mothers;
- a recognition of the impact of community deprivation, or living in the most deprived areas, but also of the hidden poverty in rural areas<sup>35</sup>;
- a poverty threshold which measures actual living standards *after* housing costs;<sup>36</sup>
- household size; and
- a measure of the risk of poverty.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF UK, Child poverty and inequality in the UK, parliamentary briefing, January 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Report from the Independent Commission on Social Mobility*, January 2009.

<sup>3</sup> ATL, 'Poverty has a major impact on children's education and schooling', press release, 11 September 2007.

<sup>4</sup> DCSF, *Deprivation and Education – The Evidence on Pupils in England*, March 2009, p.6.

<sup>5</sup> End Child Poverty with ATL, NASUWT and NUT, 'Child Poverty in the UK: Resource Pack for Schools', 2008.

<sup>6</sup> H. Barnard, 'Social mobility and child poverty strategies: well intentioned but nothing new', Joseph Rowntree Foundation blog; 5 April 2011, accessible at [www.jrf.org.uk/blog/2011/04/social-mobility-and-child-poverty-strategies](http://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/2011/04/social-mobility-and-child-poverty-strategies)

<sup>7</sup> The Poverty Site, *Poverty Indicators – Key Facts*, accessible at [www.poverty.org.uk/summary/key%20facts.shtml](http://www.poverty.org.uk/summary/key%20facts.shtml)

<sup>8</sup> See Child Poverty Action Group, *Poverty in the UK: A summary of facts and figures*, accessible at <http://www.cpag.org.uk/povertyfacts/>.

<sup>9</sup> ATL, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas*, position statement, 2008.

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- <sup>10</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Is Poverty in the UK a Denial of People's Human Rights?*, 2008.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. and Ruth Lister, 'Povertyism and 'othering': why they matter', speech at the TUC Conference on 'Challenging Povertyism, October 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> End Child Poverty with ATL, NASUWT and NUT, 'Child Poverty in the UK: Resource Pack for Schools', 2008, see also IPPR, *In-work poverty in the recession*, September 2010.
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- <sup>15</sup> Child Poverty Action Group: *Out of Reach: Benefits for Disabled Children*, November 2006.
- <sup>16</sup> See Women's Budget Group, *A Gender Impact Assessment of the Coalition Government Budget*, June 2010, [http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Women's%20Budget%20Group%20Emergency%20Budget%20Response%20\(June%202010\).pdf](http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/documents/Women's%20Budget%20Group%20Emergency%20Budget%20Response%20(June%202010).pdf)
- <sup>17</sup> TUC, *Where the Money Goes: How We Benefit from Public Services*, 12 September 2010.
- <sup>18</sup> IFS, *The Distributional Effect of Tax and Benefit Reforms to be introduced between June 2010 and April 2014: A revised assessment*, briefing note 108, (2010).
- <sup>19</sup> IFS, *Living Standards during the Recession*, briefing note 117, 2009.
- <sup>20</sup> ATL, Tackling Child Poverty and Improving Life Chances, consultation response, February 2011.
- <sup>21</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies, Child and Working-Age Poverty from 2010 to 2013, Briefing Note 115, (2010).
- <sup>22</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Government on course to meet its short-term poverty reduction target*, 15 October 2003.
- <sup>23</sup> Daycare Trust, '250 Sure Start children's centres face closure within a year', press release, 28 January 2011.
- <sup>24</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Estimating the costs of child poverty*, October 2008.
- <sup>25</sup> The Guardian, 'EMA day of action: students fight for grant', 18 January 2011.
- <sup>26</sup> IFS, Many unanswered questions over EMA successor, observations, March 2011.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> ATL, Financial Support for 16-19 year olds in Education or Training, consultation response, May 2011.
- <sup>29</sup> BBC, Schools spending 'will not rise in real terms', 13 December 2010.
- <sup>30</sup> Children's Food Campaign, Briefing on Free School Meals, accessible at <http://www.sustainweb.org/resources/files/FSM%20UC%20joint%20briefing%20WEB%20Sept%2011.pdf> .
- <sup>31</sup> ATL, Tackling Child Poverty and Improving Life Chances, consultation response, February 2011.
- <sup>32</sup> Child Poverty Action Group, Unlawful child poverty 'strategy' includes cuts that make poor families poorer, press release, 5th April 2011.
- <sup>33</sup> House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, *Child Poverty in the UK*, second report, vol.1, 2003-4.
- <sup>34</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *A minimum income standard for the UK in 2010*, July 2010.
- <sup>35</sup> ATL, *Poverty and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas*, position statement, 2008.
- <sup>36</sup> House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, *Child Poverty in the UK*, second report, vol.1, 2003-4.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.