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ADCS submission to the Child Poverty Taskforce

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd. (ADCS) is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services (DCSs). Under the provisions of the *Children Act (2004)*, the DCS acts as a single point of leadership and accountability for services for children and young people in a local area, including children's social care and education.

ADCS is committed to the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion which are fundamental to all areas of our work. We are committed to highlighting issues of disproportionality, discrimination and systemic barriers that limit opportunity where they exist, recognising that not all children, young people and families are impacted equally.

This submission draws together into one place a range of statements and policy positions the ADCS has taken on child poverty from 2017 to date with research for ease of reference. Many of the issues and challenges identified over the years still remain. ADCS therefore welcomes the new government's focus here, the opportunity to inform the work of the taskforce and the development of a new child poverty reduction strategy.

Current context

Rates of child poverty have increased in recent years after previous progress here, with an estimated 4.3 million children living in poverty in 2022-23 compared with 3.6 million in 2010-11 ([DWP](#), 2024). At regional level, the steepest increases and the highest rates of child poverty (at or above 25%) are in the North East, West Midlands and Yorkshire and Humber.

A recent report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that approximately 3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022, including approximately one million children, nearly triple the number in 2017 ([JRF](#), 2023). While the majority (72%) of children and families were born in the UK, migrants were disproportionately affected by destitution. The same report looked across the four nations and found housing was a more significant contributory factor to poverty in England than elsewhere.

The impact of poverty on childhood is incalculable, children arrive at school hungry and are unable to focus on learning, families are queuing up at food banks and schools are routinely buying coats, shoes and even washing clothes for pupils and their families. There is also a growing evidence base demonstrating the link between deprivation, family functioning and children's social care, see [Bywaters et al](#) (various). ADCS members believe that failure to address child poverty risks undermining the success of a range of planned reforms right across government.

Phase 9 of Safeguarding Pressures research (ADCS, forthcoming):

ADCS Safeguarding Pressures ([ADCS](#), various) tracks activity and trends in the safeguarding and child protection system from 2007 – date across several phases of this research (phase nine covering 2022/23 and 2023/24 is due to publish in early 2025).

Safeguarding and wellbeing concerns created by insufficient affordable housing and homelessness ran through the 86 qualitative survey responses and interviews with 34 leaders of children's services; similar concerns have been raised in past but not to the scale and extent now being seen. Areas of lower cost accommodation attracted families struggling with the cost of living,

increasing local child populations and contributing to increased general pressure on public services and children's social care in particular.

Just under three fifths (59%) of survey respondents said that increased demand on services was being driven by poor quality housing. Over three-fifths (61%) reported increased safeguarding activity linked with homelessness and just over half (54%) said that demand on children's social care was being driven by housing need amongst homeless young people:

"We are seeing on a daily basis families experiencing homelessness and struggling to cope with rent increases... We are funding landlords and paying increased rents to keep our most vulnerable families in their homes, this is not sustainable." (SP9 survey response from a unitary LA in the West Midlands)

Similarly, the relationship between poverty and safeguarding pressures came through strongly in the survey responses and interviews alike. Some local authorities were tracking the link between demand for services and levels of local deprivation:

"There is a strong correlation between rates of referral and deprivation. Analysis highlights that the rate of referral in the 10% most deprived communities is around five times higher than the rate in the 10% least deprived communities." (SP9 survey response from a county LA in Yorkshire and Humber)

Interviews with leaders were dominated by comments about how wider determinants, the social inequalities that have been termed the 'causes of causes' (Marmot et al., 2010, 2020, 2021), drive demand for safeguarding services:

- Nearly three-quarters of the 86 survey respondents said that demand from families in poverty had risen as a result of welfare reforms, particularly among larger families with three or more children.
- Nearly two-thirds said that poverty-driven demand has grown from families where one or more parents were in work.
- Nearly half said service demand had risen in relation to families with no recourse to public funds (NRPF). For families with pre-settled status and mothers who were survivors of domestic abuse on dependent visas and/or with NRPF, children's social care was often the only route to access housing support and basic living costs.
- Financial pressures of the cost-of-living crisis had a disproportionate effect on families with pre-existing vulnerabilities e.g. parental mental ill health, domestic abuse and/or family conflict.

Childhood Matters ([ADCS, 2024](#)):

In February 2024, ADCS published *Childhood Matters*, a policy position paper that called for more focus on, and investment in, children, childhoods and children's services post-general election.

Research suggests the annual cost of tackling child poverty in Britain stands at £38 billion, up £8 billion since 2013 ([Loughborough University, 2021](#)). Ongoing welfare reforms, aimed largely at the working age population, mean that some of the most economically fragile households are seeing reductions in their benefit payments or their benefits not keeping up with inflation. Universal Credit, which brings together out-of-work benefits, housing costs and in-work credits, was intended to "make work pay." However, in a stark reversal of historic trends, the majority of children living in poverty now live in a household with at least one working parent and over half of children with two or more siblings live in poverty. The 'two-child limit' on tax credits was introduced in 2017 and since then an estimated 1.5 million children have been affected by this policy ([CPAG, 2023](#)), which has

been described as “ineffective at best and discriminatory at worst” ([London School of Economics, 2023](#)).

Other welfare policies are impacting on children and young people's lives and future life chances, from the removal of the spare room subsidy, meaning the loss of a quiet space to study at home, to cuts to housing benefit meaning that care experienced 18-21-year-olds can find it difficult to access basic housing options... The movement to 'poverty proof' the school day is growing, with the cost of buying uniforms, and keeping them clean, equipment and school trips increasingly becoming practical barriers to inclusion.

Access to opportunity is also a concern, with the loss of hundreds of youth centres, children's centres and other community-based services being particularly felt by children and families who can't afford to travel or live too far away to benefit from the provision that still remains. Budget cuts in other areas of council services, including libraries, leisure and culture, impact children and families and the very fabric of communities.

Access to safe and suitable housing options, and its costs, are increasingly contributing to family distress. The deteriorating state of housing in this country has recently been described as a crucial issue for child health by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, while persistently high housing costs and the cost-of-living crisis means that many more families are struggling now to make ends meet.

England's most recent child poverty reduction strategy expired in 2017 ([DfE, 2014](#)). In contrast, the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have child poverty reduction plans and are making progress. An interim evaluation of the Scottish Child Payment – initially £10, now £25 per child per week for households already in receipt of other means-tested benefits - has had a number of positive impacts for children and families in reducing financial pressures and enabling social and educational participation ([Scottish Government, 2022](#)).

The key ask in *Childhood Matters* in relation to child poverty was for the Cabinet Office to develop and co-ordinate an ambitious, cross government plan for childhood, which pays specific attention to understanding, mitigating, and removing income, health, racial, geographical, and educational inequalities, alongside a resourcing and implementation strategy.

ADCS submission to the Work and Pensions Select Committee's inquiry on children in poverty (submitted in 2021, figures updated for the purpose of this submission):

The impact of poverty, inequality and economic disadvantage on children and young people's lives and outcomes is stark:

- In 2020, the [Education Policy Institute](#) stated in its annual report that at the current rate of progress it will take over 500 years to close the GCSE attainment gap in English and maths between disadvantaged pupils and their wealthier peers. A more recent NAO report on educational outcomes for disadvantaged children showed that the leaving school gap is wider now than it was a decade ago ([NAO, 2024](#)).
- [Latest national data](#) show that children from low income families who are eligible for means tested FSMs are four times more likely to be excluded on a fixed term or permanent basis than their peers (DfE, 2024).
- The Institute for Public Policy Research's (IPPR's) [Health and Prosperity Commission](#) called for a 'new beginning' for childhood health following a breakdown in the health inheritance, noting for the first time in 200 years this generation of children are not guaranteed to live a much longer, healthier life than those who came before them (IPPR, 2024).

- The links between deprivation and statutory children's social care interventions is well established ([Bywaters et al, 2016](#)); family income has a causal relationship with poor child outcomes and there is a correlation between parental stress and anxiety linked to worries over the family income and parenting capacity.
- The National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's [latest annual report](#) looked at risk factors where a child was seriously injured or died, which showed that over a third of reviews included in the qualitative sample used included families known to be experiencing poverty, deprivation or financial difficulties (DfE, 2024).

Children's services offer practical help and support to a growing number of children and families falling through the welfare safety net under Section 17 of the *Children Act 1989*, which places a general duty on LAs to safeguard and promote the welfare of 'children in need.' LAs are supporting a growing number of households with NRPF who are at risk of destitution due to their immigration status at an annual cost of £77.6 million in 2022/23, up from £44 million in 2019/20 ([NRPF Connect, 2024](#)). Beyond NRPF families, children's services are also regularly making referrals to food banks, buying mattresses, carpets, children's clothes and other basic essentials for a growing number of families we work with who simply cannot afford them under Section 17.

Further, the DfE spends considerable sums mitigating the impact of poverty on children and young people's lives and educational outcomes, for example:

- Latest DfE data show that one in four pupils were eligible for **means tested free school meals (FSMs)** 2023/24.
- The **pupil premium** is a top up fund to help schools improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. Secondaries receive £1050 and primaries £1480 for every pupil, who claims FSMs, or who has claimed FSMs, in the last six years, while early years providers are receiving £353 per child in 2024/25.
- Since 2020, the DfE has been providing **free sanitary products** to schools in a bid to address 'period poverty' after pupils reported missing school as they could not cover the costs of buying these products themselves.
- Since 2021, the annual £200 million **Holiday Activities Fund** has allowed local authorities and schools to run free holiday provision, including healthy food and enriching activities during part of the Easter, summer and Christmas school holidays.
- Between April 2020 and February 2021, the DfE purchased and distributed over one million **laptops and tablets** plus routers to help pupils of all ages living in low-income households access remote learning during the pandemic.

Key findings from the joint ADCS, CPAG and CWIP survey of social workers ([CPAG, 2020](#)):

In early 2020, ADCS worked with the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) plus researchers from the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP) to survey social workers about their experiences of working with children and families living in poverty. A total of 129 valid responses were received.

Prevalence and severity of poverty

Social workers said the vast majority of the families they work with are living in poverty. Families are experiencing food insecurity, homelessness, an inability to keep warm and stress associated with debt issues on a regular basis. Nearly all respondents (94%) said that the prevalence and severity of poverty experienced by families they work with has increased in recent years. One respondent commented: *"It is hard to work with a family and support them to make meaningful and lasting change when their economic situation is going to remain the same. Sometimes we are able to pay off some debt or apply to a charity which will do this. However, the stress that some of our families are under is immense."*

Impact on effective social work

Social workers reported that working effectively with families who are living in poverty is more challenging. Common experiences ranged from the practical challenges of families not being able to afford travel to appointments, or those posed by insecure work which makes it difficult to arrange or attend appointments, through to the emotional barriers arising from the stress experienced by parents facing financial strain trying to meet their children's needs with insufficient financial resources. One respondent said: *"Parents are scared to tell us their financial difficulties because they are worried it would be used against them (it wouldn't) but it increases their vulnerability and the stress. Parents are so focused on survival that doing work to address deeper rooted issues is so hard...how can they talk about parenting when their mind is always on how they will pay their rent or buy food or uniform or cover costs of a school trip?"*

Impact of changes to the social security system

Social workers were asked about how changes to the social security system have affected the families they work with, for example cuts to benefit levels, the introduction of UC, and policies such as the two-child limit, the 'bedroom tax', and the benefit cap which disproportionately affect families with children. 78% of respondents reported that over half of the families they worked with had been affected by these changes. The adequacy of benefit levels was a key issue raised by social workers. One respondent said: *"Universal Credit isn't enough to live on. I support care experienced young people. I was shocked to discover that Universal Credit as a sole source of income can mean young people don't pass some housing associations' financial assessments!"*

Impact of cuts to services for children and families

Social workers were asked about the impact of cuts to services for children and families on their work. Respondents overwhelmingly said the lack of support services in local communities had a negative impact on the families they work with, and led to situations escalating in severity as there was little scope for preventative work. Cuts to mental health services were most frequently cited by respondents, but children's centres, youth services, libraries and cuts to more preventative aspects of local authority children's services e.g. early help, were also mentioned. One respondent said: *"There are less resources for early intervention such as support groups for parents, leading to a higher level of children becoming subject to child protection plans and care proceedings. Waiting lists for children to see a mental health professional are very long leading to issues becoming more entrenched and difficult to address."*

There were **two recommendations** here: the development of a cross-government child poverty strategy and the provision of adequate funding to local government and other support services for children and families.

Building a country that works for all children post-Covid-19 ([ADCS, 2020](#)):

In summer 2020, ADCS published a discussion paper focused on pandemic recovery. Covid-19 triggered an important public debate about health inequalities, deprivation and ethnicity. The recovery phase offered the then-government an opportunity to further its 'levelling up' agenda; there is a strong relationship between household income, housing quality and educational performance, coordinated action on child poverty cannot wait. Further, the vital importance of public health and the value of prevention and early intervention have been underlined during this crisis. We needed a plan to address and stem the risks and challenges families faced during the pandemic and prevent them from escalating further.

The then-Prime Minister's vision for recovery included a clear commitment to tackling this country's "great unresolved challenges." ADCS members suggested that the moment represented a once in a lifetime opportunity to be bold and tackle head on the inequalities and the structural barriers many children and families face, particularly those from the most deprived areas and from global majority groups, and bring about meaningful and lasting change.

The single recommendation put forward in this discussion paper echoed the principal recommendation in *Health inequality in England: The Marmot Review 10 years on* ([The Health Foundation](#), 2020), namely to initiate an ambitious and world-leading health inequalities strategy and lead a Cabinet-level cross-departmental committee charged with its development and implementation.

A series of specific recommendations in relation to addressing the inequalities children face were put forward by Sir Michael Marmot in his comprehensive review, these include: increasing levels of spending on the early years and ensuring the allocation of funding is proportionately higher for more deprived areas, reducing levels of child poverty to 10 percent – level with the lowest rates in Europe - and putting equity at the heart of national decisions about education policy and funding.

A country that works for all children ([ADCS](#), 2017):

In *A country that works for all children*, ADCS sought to make the case for policy focus on, and investment in, children and children's services. All children should be able to say:

- My family and I do not live in poverty, we are not hungry
- We have an affordable, warm and safe home and environment
- I am supported to grow and develop. Education builds my confidence and prepares me not just for exam success and the world of work but also for independence
- I am supported early if I have any emotional, health and/ or physical needs
- I am not unnecessarily criminalised and professionals understand my circumstances, I am listened to and actively involved in any decisions they take about my life
- My contribution to my community and wider society is both valued and recognised.

Poverty constrains people's opportunities, only through collective actions can we drive change to achieve a country that works for all children. ADCS members called for sustainable funding for children's services, including schools, and urged the marshalling of resources across the various government departments with responsibilities for different aspects of children's lives and a reaffirmation of the value of preventative services.

ADCS put forward seven recommendations for government, including the development of a 'children and young people impact assessment,' to be used alongside equalities impact assessments and a cross-government review to understand better the reasons for, and links between, rising levels of child poverty and demand for children's statutory services.

Summary of recommendations from 2017 – date:

- Development of an ambitious, cross government plan for childhood, which pays specific attention to understanding, mitigation, and recovering income, health, racial and geographical, and educational inequalities, alongside a resourcing and implementation strategy
- Development of a cross-government child poverty strategy
- Allocation of adequate funding to local government and other support services for children and families

- Initiation of an ambition and world-leading health inequalities strategy plus a Cabinet level cross-departmental committee charged with its development and implementation
- The development of a children and young people impact assessment for government departments to use alongside existing equalities impact assessments
- A cross-government review to better understand the reasons for, and links between, rising levels of child poverty and demand for children's social care.

To discuss any of the issues raised in this submission further, please contact the relevant ADCS policy officer in the first instance via katy.block@adcs.org.uk.