

Four things we can do to tackle child poverty

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Gordon Brown has denounced UK [child poverty](#) rising to its '[highest levels in living memory](#)' and called for a £3bn investment [fund](#) for the children of austerity. We applaud and support his intervention – child poverty has devastating impacts on children and their families, and imposes a huge cost on the whole of society .

Shockingly, in the 5th largest economy in the world, [300,000](#) more UK children fell into absolute poverty during a single year at the height of cost of living crisis. Our children are not just poorer, they are getting sicker too. The Academy of Medical Sciences released a stark [report](#) highlighting wide-ranging evidence of declining health among children under five in the UK, calling on policymakers to take urgent action to address the situation. That report warns Government that major health issues like infant mortality, obesity and tooth decay are not only damaging the nation's youngest citizens and their future, but also its economic prosperity, with the cost of inaction estimated to be at least £16 billion a year. Similarly, The Food Foundation charity has [described](#) how 60 per cent of food insecure households surveyed last month said they are buying less fruit than they do usually. Some 44 per cent also said they were buying fewer vegetables than normal in January 2024.

In the past, we might have expected these inequalities to be mitigated by public services. Instead, the greatest cuts to services supporting children have hit the areas with the highest proportions of poor children. Cuts to local authority spending have been significantly higher in deprived areas and in the North compared to the South, leading to worsening [health outcomes](#). The North saw larger cuts to Sure Start children's centres, with funding [cut](#) by £412 per eligible child, compared to £283 in the rest of England. Schools in London [receive](#) almost 10 per cent more funding per pupil than schools in the North. In a survey of local government councillors, 8 out of 10 said that children in their local area are at risk of destitution and 7 out of 10 said that their health and social care services don't have enough resources to cope with [current pressures](#).

The mental health conditions that children in the North of England developed during the pandemic will cost an estimated £13.2 billion in lost wages over their lifetime earnings. That loss, compounded by all of the losses caused by inequalities in physical health and skills development, make the consequences of not investing in children obvious.

The common sense notion that investments in childhood are critical to outcomes in adulthood is all too often dismissed on grounds of cost, or ignored by politicians focused on short-term gains. Whether it be the removal of free milk by the Thatcher Government or the continued debate over free school meals, the failure to apply basic cost-benefit analyses to return on investment leaves the UK more dysfunctional, anti-social, unproductive and unequal. As universal early years provision in some American states has shown, as well as comprehensive support for families in many European countries, investment in children pays off – creating healthy, active adult citizens.

In [Act Now](#), we set out how these challenges can only be addressed by a policy programme as ambitious as that which the Labour Government in 1945 introduced under manifestly worse circumstances. There are four key steps that can reduce child poverty very effectively and very quickly.

First, just as homelessness can only be addressed by homes, poverty can only be mitigated by money. The market has simply failed to provide families with adequate and secure incomes by which to lead stable lives. Many of the children in poverty live in families that are in paid employment. The state is the only body capable of providing the social safety net needed. We argue that basic income is the only sustainable response to the direction of our economy and have [shown](#) that a starter basic income payment would achieve comparable impacts on child poverty, much more quickly, than the New Labour reforms from 1997-2010. In lieu of that, an immediate £20 uplift in Universal Credit is essential. An ambitious social security policy is necessary if we are to mitigate child poverty, which disproportionately affects minoritised ethnic groups and families in which someone lives with a disability.

Second, we need national auto-enrolment on free school meals to help address inequalities in access to food and support children's concentration and educational engagement, but also to make a considerable difference to the budgets of families living on the lowest incomes. While local action is being progressed to auto-enrol children on FSMs on a location-by-location basis, supported by the Fix Our Food network, national policy on this would remove many of the bureaucratic and legal hurdles that exist when attempting to do this locally. Auto-enrolment has [enabled](#) more than 6,000 children to access their FSM entitlement, raising an extra £3.8 million in Pupil Premium funding for local schools.

Third, we need to embed [Equality Impact Assessments](#) into all policy processes at national, regional and local levels, use Children's Rights Impact Assessments to evaluate the specific impact of policies on children and young people, and use devolved Citizens Assemblies that include young people to make sure their voices are included when making policy decisions. Our main political parties focus almost exclusively on the electoral interests of older people. This has had catastrophic consequences for young people.

Fourth, we need formal protection for younger and future generations. The Welsh Government has pioneered such legislative work through its The Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015), which grants Wales 'the ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve our social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being'. As part of this, Wales has the [Welsh Future Generations Commissioner](#), responsible for upholding this legal obligation, identifying future threats, such as the development of automation, and developing formal responses. We need this across the UK.

In our Act Now survey research, we found overwhelming support for these policies: two thirds of respondents in the so-called Red Wall constituencies, with 53 per cent among those who voted Conservative and 79 per cent among those who voted Labour in the 2019 general election. Nationally, approval was similar: 67 per cent overall, with just over half among those intending to vote Conservative in the upcoming election, three-quarters of those intending to vote Labour and two-thirds among those who don't know who they will vote for or who don't intend to vote at present.

These are common sense policies – good for children and their families, good for society now and in the future, feasible, affordable and popular – we need to act now.

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Yes thriving is something children experience as individuals but let's remember that it's a state or outcome of a complex system such a system generates patterns, amplifies and is influenced and history of the whole how did children development, wellbeing come to this and what systemic structural effects do we want to tolerate or promote? No form of organizing is value free. We should be clear on our values and ambitions for children and be good caretakers of a system that can help them thrive - it's a choice.

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