

Church of England Board for Social Responsibility

Response to

‘Measuring Child Poverty’ Consultation Document

Introduction

1. The terms of reference of the Church of England Board for Social Responsibility require it ‘to co-ordinate the thought and action of the Church in matters affecting the life of all in society’. The Board reports to the Archbishops’ Council and, through it, to the General Synod.
 2. The Board warmly welcomes the Government’s decision to issue a Consultation Document on measuring child poverty in order to track its progress towards eradicating child poverty in the best way possible. We have welcomed the Chancellor’s meetings with faith organisations to discuss child poverty in both the international and domestic contexts.
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3. In July 2001, the General Synod of the Church of England reaffirmed its commitment to the practice of justice which means ensuring that within society the needs of each person and family, especially the needs of children, are met¹ and asked Her Majesty’s Government to commission independent research which will lead to the identification of minimum income standards related to need and then bring forward the legislation that will put such minimum standards into effect².
 4. The Board recognises the commitment of the Government to eradicate child poverty, particularly as children have replaced pensioners as the poorest group. The well-being of children, as acknowledged by the Government, is governed by the income of the family, not just the children’s benefits. The low adult rate of benefit for unemployment and lone parenthood remain a matter for concern. Extra help given to the mother in a family is highly likely to be of benefit to the children. Studies have consistently shown that women will forego spending on themselves to make sure the children have what they need. We therefore welcome the Government’s proposals to pay child credit to the main carer (usually the mother). We need to be alert to incidences of poverty experienced by women and children in households not defined as poor, but where the income (usually from the man’s work) is not appropriately shared. Any measure of poverty needs to

¹ *Low Cost but Just* A theological response to the report of the Family Budget Unit by the Revd Dr Nicholas Sagovsky p.1

² *Report of Proceedings 2001* Vol 32 No.1 p.383

take such factors into consideration and for a full picture, it is necessary to take into account household types other than those with children.

5. The Government should also recognise that policies designed to help children cannot sensibly ignore the rest of the family of which they form a part and that there are poverty issues to be addressed in household types other than those with children.
6. Whilst many of the technical questions relating to the measurement of poverty are best answered by academic specialists, the Board endorses the view expounded by such organisations as Church Action on Poverty and the Zacchaeus 2000 Trust that the perspectives of those with personal experience of poverty should help to inform policy decisions.

Questions asked in the Consultation paper

1. What aspects of child poverty should be captured in a long-term measure?

We recognise that, in absolute terms, the changes to the benefits system introduced by the Government have made a difference to the income of many families and we welcome the redistribution of income that has been achieved. However, one of the most striking aspects of contemporary British society is the growth of inequality, even in the lifetime of this Government, which affects rich and poor. As far back as 1985, *Faith in the City*, the Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas called for poverty to be measured in relative terms. Poverty exists even in a rich society if people are denied access to what is generally considered a reasonable standard and quality of life in that society. Although this means that in a time of prosperity, a poverty measure could go up and more people appear to be in poverty even if their incomes are increasing, they will still be experiencing poverty in relation to other members of society, whose income increases even more. Although the experience of poverty involves questions of rights and relationships, powerlessness, social exclusion and loss of dignity, the lack of an adequate income remains at the heart of the problem. There is evidence from parish clergy, social workers and youth workers employed by the Church that families living on long term low income levels are still not able to afford even in absolute terms, what is needed to sustain an adequate standard of living. This evidence, which we could illustrate with quotes from clergy, is in accordance with the arguments put forward by groups such as Church Action on Poverty and Zacchaeus 2000 Trust. Any measure must also take into account the minimum income needed to sustain a standard of living, as called for by the General Synod, that is agreed by consensus and particularly in consultation with people who are living in poverty. Without some kind of minimum income line successive governments have been free to pay levels of benefits which have left individuals and families in poverty. At the same time, while in-work benefits have been improved, poverty related criteria for setting the Minimum Wage have been lacking. The Board recognises that this is a difficult task and it will need adequate research. However it is

important to 'establish an income below which no-one should live, a level which would protect the opportunity to live a dignified life' (Church Action on Poverty briefing paper). This would give a measure by which Government strategies and legislation could be judged and provide a benchmark below which no-one's income should be allowed to fall. We are also persuaded by the arguments put forward by the Fabian Society and the New Policy Institute in *Responsibility for all* and emphasised by the Zacchaeus 2000 Trust that any measure should also include some acknowledgment of debt/arrears incurred by trying to meet ordinary living expenses.

2. Do you agree with the criteria for selecting a good indicator set out on p.19?

The Board agrees with the indicators set out in paragraph 38. However any indicator should have credibility with the section of the population to whom it most applies, namely those who are living in poverty, and it should be easily understandable and accepted by them. This can only be done in consultation with those living in poverty. The indicators should also be applicable to all groups of people in poverty and not just to children. One particular indicator in current use is open to question. The strong emphasis on reducing the numbers of children in workless households has our support in general terms, but we see a real danger in over-emphasis on this policy, which may produce other poverty-related problems. There are a significant number of households where adults cannot work or where it might be in the best interests for the child, for parents to care for the children themselves, such as in the early years or to help them cope with the trauma of family breakdown, ill health, or bereavement. Under the present benefit rules, in which the income of the adult is held down to encourage work, parents may have to choose between poverty and work. The starkness of the choice has been eased by the increases in child benefit and in child dependency additions, however there is a significant number of parents (particularly lone parents) who are in income poverty. If they return to work the immediate outcome is to move them out of the income poverty band – an apparent success. But if in so doing, the children's emotional needs have to be neglected, the danger is a less positive outcome for the children, leading to the perpetuation of long term poverty. This issue must be addressed. Until it is there is a danger that the use of the reduction in workless families as an indicator of progress in the effort to combat child poverty will be seriously misleading.

3. What do you think is the best summary or headline measure to track long-term progress of child poverty?

Any useful measure must take into account the long-term income a child has access to. Whilst there is strength in the argument to include other measures to capture broader aspects of deprivation, adequate income is still the key. It remains a significant concern to us that the percentage of children in low-income families who enter higher education has not changed significantly. We need also how far below the headline income measure the family is and whether the lowest groups are moving up. For example if we were to take

60% of the median as a line, we should be particularly concerned about those who are furthest away from the line persistently.

4. In particular do you have views on the four approaches?

The Board concurs with Church Action on Poverty that approach 4 has the most merit since it involves the collection of a range of indicators of low income and 'consistent poverty'. The definition of poverty is complicated and any measure should reflect some of that complexity despite the disadvantages which are inevitably associated with it.

5. Does the approach you favour capture the factors you listed in response to q 1 and satisfy most of the criteria that you have highlighted in response to q 2?

As already indicated, we would prefer a system of measurement which recognises the point about relative poverty, takes into account an assessment of minimum income and which is drawn up in consultation with people who are living in poverty rather than an absolute low-income indicator proposed by Professor Hills.

6. Do you have any particular views on the geographical coverage within the UK of the four approaches?

There is a real danger that in labelling certain areas as 'poor' the real poverty that is found in single households surrounded by areas of relative affluence will be overlooked. (The experience of the Sure Start initiative illustrates this). The Board would also underline the importance (recognised by the Government) of monitoring areas with significant ethnic minority populations, to ensure they receive the full benefit of anti-poverty programmes. Any measure should have components that can be compared internationally but also across the four parts of the UK. The importance of maintaining comparative information of this kind is evident from experience in Northern Ireland. In the 1960s and 1970s data on Northern Ireland was so hard to find that there was a tendency amongst writers on poverty, and social exclusion generally, simply to exclude the Province. The serious poverty and discrimination in Northern Ireland was easily ignored. Apart from the obvious price paid by the people of Northern Ireland for this the rest of the UK was also affected. It is important that the risk of a repetition in any part of the UK is avoided.

+THOMAS SOUTHWARK
Chairman

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