

**Social Justice and Social Security Committee
Post Legislative Scrutiny of the
Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017
13 September 2024**

NASUWT welcomes the Social Justice and Social Security Committee's call for views on the impact of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017.

NASUWT is the largest UK-wide teachers' union and represents teachers and school leaders in all sectors of education.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

1. The Act introduced a statutory framework for reducing child poverty. What difference has that framework made to the way the Scottish Government has approached reducing child poverty?

The Union, as part of the scrutiny of the original Bill, clearly set out that key to tackling child poverty is:

- *the establishment of an effective statutory and regulatory framework for policy development and implementation;*
- *sustained investment in anti-poverty programmes;*
- *co-ordinated Government policy on education, health and housing;*
and
- *a welfare system that supports children and families.*

We welcomed the Scottish Government's intention to enshrine its ambition to eradicate child poverty in legislation at that time, but we also cautioned that legislation will be a key lever for change but not an end in itself.

It is notable that of the four bullet points listed above, only bullet point one has been implemented. While it can be said that the framework has effectively supported government rhetoric, neither the statutory provisions nor the political bluster have resulted in significant change. According to Scottish Government poverty statistics, 240,000 children (24% of all children) remained in poverty in Scotland between 2020 and 2023, which places children and young people at a significantly higher risk of poverty than pensioners (15%) and working age adults (21%).

Although child poverty rates remain broadly stable in Scotland, the Child Poverty Action Group has suggested that child poverty should soon fall in Scotland because of the full roll-out of the Scottish child payment and increases to its value in November 2022.

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 required Scottish Ministers to ensure that less than 18% of children are living in poverty by 2023/24 and less than 10% of children are living in poverty by 2030.

The period for the interim targets has now passed. The statistics for 2023-24 won't be available until March 2025.

But in the context of the current cost-of-living crisis, given the minimal impact on child poverty figures, statistics to date and the absence of targeted governmental action and investment, it is highly unlikely the 2030 targets will be met.

2. Child poverty targets, delivery plans and reporting requirements are underpinned by the legislative framework in the Act. What difference has the statutory framework made to the way local authorities and health boards have approached reducing child poverty?

Let's consider the current situation in Glasgow as an example. NASUWT has been calling on Glasgow City Council to reverse its planned cuts to teacher numbers. A Freedom of Information request from NASUWT to the Council revealed that the Council held no information on any risk assessments that had been completed in relation to the Council's plans to cut teacher posts and how those plans could impact on pupil and staff safety. Nor was it initially able to furnish NASUWT with any equalities impact assessments that had been carried out in relation to the Council's plans to cut teacher posts and any consequent impact on staff and pupils in relation to equal opportunities. Eventually, and following considerable pressure, Glasgow City Council was forced to publicly admit that plans to cut 450 teachers from the city's schools *'may have a detrimental impact on the poorest children and young people'*.

This conclusion is certainly obvious: cutting teacher numbers will likely hit the poorest children and those with additional needs the most. Tackling the poverty and disability-related attainment gaps requires considerably more ambition than merely adhering to minimum staffing regulations. It is difficult to see how such cuts could result in anything other than greater barriers to achievement, higher disengagement and increasing inequality for the pupils who are most in need.

Glasgow City Council's position is that an EQIA was attached to the budget proposals document in February and included an assessment of the impact of the proposed service reforms. A further EQIA was then completed in June 2024. They aver that councillors were provided with the information they needed in order to make a decision with such wide-ranging consequences.

In this context, and considering similar decisions being made across Scotland to cut key funding to services like education, it is difficult to detect any positive difference the statutory framework has made to the way local authorities approached reducing child poverty.

In Glasgow, we can see that the system was already under strain and could ill afford further cuts, especially to something as vital as teacher numbers. The

cost-of-living pressures on schools and families are seriously impacting pupils' learning and schools' ability to meet the needs of pupils on roll. The last 14 years of cuts are continuing to take their toll on children, young people and families across the country. Despite all of this, reducing child poverty clearly did not greatly impact the Council's approach to its budget.

Whilst governments and local authorities have failed to tackle the depth, breadth and urgency of the financial difficulties faced by families, schools have been left to pick up the pieces. Without sustained investment in anti-poverty programmes, co-ordinated government policy on education, health and housing, and a welfare system that supports children and families, the statutory framework is simply another bureaucratic tick-box exercise for local authorities.

The following motions are illustrative and were passed at NASUWT Scotland Conference 2024:

Stop Education Cuts

Conference believes the mechanism by which state schools are funded is critical to securing an inclusive and world-class education system, operating in the public interest and contributing to the maintenance of a democratic, just and inclusive society.

Conference is alarmed that Scottish local authorities are under significant pressure to cut costs; for example, Glasgow City Council has produced a budget cutting £27.8 million from the education budget.

Conference abhors the adverse effect this will have on all education in the city but is particularly concerned how this will affect those with additional support needs as well as the poverty-related attainment gap.

Conference calls upon the Scotland Executive Council to lobby COSLA and the Scottish Government to protect education budgets, with particular regard to additional support needs and the poverty-related attainment gap.

Education Cuts and Low-Income Families

Conference condemns the ongoing assault on all education budgets and particularly condemns the disregard for the effect this has on the most deprived areas and the future life chances of children from these areas.

Conference calls upon the Scotland Executive Council to evaluate the effect cuts have on the lowest income families.

Conference calls upon the Scotland Executive Council to lobby COSLA and the Scottish Government to protect education budgets, with particular regard to the most deprived areas.

3. What difference has having the targets, delivery plans and reporting requirements built into the Act made at a national level?

The national targets and delivery plan provide an additional means through which the Scottish Government can be held to account. The Scottish Government's 2nd Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan (2022) included commitments to universal free school meals:

*'In addition, we will further expand universal Free School Meal provision to all children in primary schools. This change will tackle stigma and ensure high uptake of healthy and nutritious food for those that need it most. We will continue to deliver alternate provision during school holiday periods for around 144,000 children who need it most.'*¹

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/best-start-bright-futures-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2022-26/pages/7/>

Following the recent Programme for Government, NASUWT welcomed the First Minister's comments that eradicating child poverty is his top priority. As every teacher knows, the scourge of poverty has an impact on virtually every aspect of a child's development, educational attainment and behaviour.

However, while his statement was heavy on commitments to reduce and tackle poverty levels among school age and early years children, it was light on detail on how this will actually be achieved in practice. Furthermore, it was exceedingly difficult to square the First Minister's stated focus on eradicating child poverty with the decision to drop the commitment to introducing universal free school meals, a decision which also directly contradicts the Government's commitments in the 2022 Child Poverty Delivery Plan.

There are many struggling families who do not qualify for free school meals whose children will now miss out. Ensuring all children get a nutritious free meal each day would have educational benefits and ensure that no child goes hungry. It would also represent an investment in the wellbeing of our children now and offer rewards long into the future. We have urged the Scottish Government to reconsider this move.

The national targets and reporting mandated in law clearly illustrate the litany of broken promises, but they do not in and of themselves secure change. NASUWT will continue to advocate that the time to turn the political rhetoric into reality is overdue.

4. The Act set up several scrutiny measures. How effective have these been?

The concern with the existing scrutiny measures is not that they are failing to adequately report on progress; rather they simultaneously provide the Scottish Government with a policy and procedural veil to hide behind, a cloak of respectability in a landscape littered with empty promises.

5. If you were involved in scrutiny of the Bill in 2016/17, has it had the impact you expected?

One of the most profound and damaging consequences of child poverty is the impact that it has on pupils' educational attainment, their wider wellbeing and their future life chances. Teachers and school leaders are acutely aware that poverty is a key inhibitor of educational progress. While there have clearly been factors impacting education since the implementation of the Act, including but not limited to the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, the situation remains that the poverty-related attainment gap persists and has not been dented by the passing of the legislation.

6. What does the implementation of the Act tell us about the effectiveness or otherwise of statutory targets as a way of driving policy?

The Union's position remains that combining a range of indicators provides more valid information about poverty and disadvantage than is possible through the use of any single indicator.

Statutory targets have provided accountability, but they appear to have been considered aspirational only in reality. NASUWT considers that there should be an independent evaluation of the Act's effectiveness.

7. Do you have any other comments?

NASUWT believes that there should be clear statutory guidance on school charging policies and curriculum access. As a priority, the Scottish Government should specifically address the cost of education and make provision for regulations which will secure poverty proofing of the school day. The Union has also advocated strongly for commitments on universal free school meals to not only be maintained but extended.

NASUWT Scotland Conference 2024 affirmed this need for urgent action by passing the following motion:

Poverty

Conference is appalled at the figures showing increasing numbers of children living in poverty in Scotland. Conference is concerned that one of the most

profound and damaging consequences of child poverty is the impact it has on pupils' educational attainment, their wider wellbeing and their future life chances. Conference notes that there is a growing body of evidence indicating high levels of income inequality increase instability, debt and inflation which are damaging for a developed economy in the long term. Conference believes that poverty and socioeconomic inequality has the greatest effect of any inequality on a person's health, mortality and overall life chances. Conference calls on the Scotland Executive Council to:

- i. work with STUC, CPAG, Poverty Alliance and others to continue to campaign to eradicate poverty in Scotland;*
- ii. continue to support the Food for Thought campaign;*
- iii. campaign robustly to ensure poverty is viewed through a similar lens to protected characteristics and 'povertyism' is included in anti-discrimination law, as well as raising the profile of socioeconomic inequality in the overall equalities discussion and*
- iv. look to support a more diverse teaching profession, which inter alia includes those with lived experience of poverty.*

It is imperative that the Scottish Government takes all possible action within its remit to exert sustained downward pressure on child poverty and its causes. The Union has criticised the proposed timescale of 2030 from the start as lacking ambition and failing to recognise the current need. Schools and families cannot be expected to soldier on. We need a government that will deliver a better deal for our schools and other children's services, as well as greater financial security for families across the country.

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