

SPEAKING OUT

Supporting the Sector to Influence Policy

Consultation Unit
Department for Children, Schools and Families
Ground Floor Area B
Castle View House
East Lane
Runcorn
Cheshire
WA7 2GJ

11 March 2009

Dear Colleague,

Re: Ending Child Poverty: Making It Happen consultation

Children England and the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) are pleased to have the opportunity to submit a joint response to HM Government's consultation - *Ending Child Poverty: Making It Happen* - as part of the Speaking Out project.

The Speaking Out project aims to build a voice for the children and young people's voluntary and community sector (CYPVCS) across government. The project seeks to develop closer links between a range of government departments, including the Home Office, CLG, MoJ, DEFRA, Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and the Department of Health, and the CYPVCS in delivering cross departmental plans such as *Every Child Matters* and *the Children's Plan*. Funded by the Office of the Third Sector, Speaking Out also supports the CYPVCS in understanding the impact of a wide range of government policies and provides routes to influence these policies.

On behalf of our members, Children England and NCVYS firmly welcome the Government's renewed commitment to eradicate child poverty in the UK by the year 2020. The opportunity to comment on the specific legislative proposals set out to achieve this ambitious goal is particularly welcomed and forms the content of this consultation response. In addition, this consultation response is endorsed by colleagues at the National Youth Agency.

The 2020 vision

The vision of eradicating child poverty by 2020 through four key building blocks, namely employment opportunities, appropriate financial support for families, improvement in children's life chances and creating safer communities, is firmly supported by Children England and NCVYS. Long-term commitment, action and investment in these four policy areas for those families most in need will undoubtedly go a long way to ensure the greatest impact on reducing child poverty by 2020. However, the focus on 2020 should not detract

from the Government's pressing need to massively invest resources in order to achieve its interim target of halving child poverty by 2010.

Measuring and defining success

Children England and NCVYS agree that for the Government to be confident that child poverty has been eradicated a range of indicators must be used that are comprehensive and fully capture the many facets of child poverty. The three proposed indicators (measuring relative low income, material deprivation combined with low income and duration of poverty) will, taken together, provide a broad mechanism by which to measure child poverty. The inclusion of an absolute low income indicator, to capture whether low income families actually see their real incomes increase over time, will however provide an additional and more complete measurement of success.

In relation to defining child poverty, Children England and NCVYS endorse the End Child Poverty Coalition's¹ call for the Government to measure relative low income after (not before) housing costs, which reflects the actual disposable income available for families in poverty. This point was further reinforced during a recent Speaking Out roundtable discussion on social mobility held in Peterborough on 3 March 2009.

Key proposals and actions

We support the suggested proposal to enshrine in legislation a duty for the Government to publish a child poverty strategy every three years in the run up to 2020. An annual progress report to Parliament, which includes updated independent statistical data on child poverty in the UK, will go further in making the Government more accountable for monitoring its progress and analysing what further action is needed on a yearly basis. It will be imperative that the Government prepares the child poverty strategy in meaningful consultation with key stakeholders such as the children and young people's voluntary and community sector (CYPVCS).

Establishing an expert child poverty commission, which brings together leaders in the field to provide advice on the Government to inform the child poverty strategy, will also help drive the action needed to monitor key milestones and developments towards achieving the 2020 goal. The child poverty commission should be fully representative of all key delivery stakeholders responsible for the well-being of children and young people, including those in the voluntary sector. As national infrastructure organisations, Children England and NCVYS are well placed to represent our member base, which consists of both national and local voluntary and community organisations working with children, young people and their families. We would therefore welcome closer dialogue with the DCSF in the forthcoming development of the commission.

Working with local authorities and delivery partners

Whilst recognising that the key to achieving the 2020 vision lies in establishing legislation for local authorities, it is disappointing that the *Ending Child Poverty: Making It Happen* consultation documents make no specific reference to the invaluable role of the voluntary and community sector. The use of the terminology 'delivery partners' is vague and does not accurately reflect the vast amount of good practice and essential services that are provided by the voluntary sector.

¹ Children England and NCVYS are members of the End Child Poverty coalition and fully endorse their statement of principles for legislating for the eradication of child poverty by 2020.

The consultation seeks views on the main constraints to tackling child poverty at the local level and ways in which to overcome them. Effective and meaningful partnership working between local authorities and the voluntary sector is often raised as a key difficulty for our members. Whilst there has been considerable improvement in involving the CYPVCS in policy making at the local level, through increased representation on Local Strategic Partnership Boards and recent Children's Trust arrangements, these developments are not systemic across the country.

A wider appreciation of the contribution and influence that the CYPVCS can make to effective policy making is needed by both central and local government in order to make headway in achieving the 2020 target. It is important that the CYPVCS is able to get its voice heard by both central and local government and make a meaningful contribution to the design, implementation and evaluation of the Government's activities both locally and nationally. This is crucial as national policy, as in the case of eradicating child poverty, often relies heavily on local implementation and effective partnership working.

Moreover, the CYPVCS plays a crucial role in supporting children, young people and families living in poverty. Many of our member organisations are small, localised bodies facing continuous cuts in funding and the threat of closure². The Government and local authorities need to recognise that with the loss of each organisation working with disadvantaged families, more children and young people could be at risk of living in poverty. The Government and local authorities need to ensure that through robust commissioning procedures, these organisations that provide vital support to children, young people and families, are sustained through long-term funding mechanisms and are fully included in local strategic partnership arrangements to effectively influence decision-making at a local level.

Representation and participation

It is essential that the Government continues to communicate and engage consistently, effectively and meaningfully with the CYPVCS, bearing in mind that the sector is diverse and comprises a range of organisations all with distinct needs. Furthermore it is important that all three tiers of the voluntary and community sector - local, regional and national - are well represented in future initiatives to reduce child poverty and that the specific needs of children and young people are taken into consideration in policy development.

Children England and NCVS firmly believe that children and young people should be able to make their voices heard on the issues that affect them. In order to adequately understand the needs of children and young people living in poverty, the Government needs to actively and effectively consult with children, young people and families, through the voluntary sector to ensure hard to reach and vulnerable voices are heard. Involving children and young people in developing services and creating opportunities for them to voice their opinions about issues that they care about, such as ending child poverty, is central to the aims and values of the CYPVCS.

Existing local performance framework

If exercised consistently and properly, the existing local performance framework and mechanisms that should currently exist in local authorities, such as Comprehensive Area Assessments, Local Strategic Partnership Boards, Children's Trust arrangements, Overview

² A recent survey of small children's organisations conducted by Children England found that 2 in 5 small organisations are facing threat of closure. See Children England (2009) *Small Change: A Survey of small voluntary and community sector organisations working with children, young people and families* www.childrenengland.org.uk

and Scrutiny, strategic Children and Young People's Plans and Local Area Agreements (LAAs), should be sufficient enough to achieve the 2020 vision and the Every Child Matters aim for all children to achieve economic well-being. Creating further statutory duties, such as the proposed requirement for all local authorities to set a specific local child poverty target (Option 3 in the consultation document), in addition to the existing mechanisms, could have the potential to result in overly bureaucratic structures that lose sight of the range of action and commitment needed by local authorities to tackle the causes and consequences of child poverty.

It is important that local authorities seek to develop and sustain sensible reporting and accountability streams and improve monitoring and evaluation. As child poverty is such a cross-cutting issue, it is imperative for local authorities to recognise and identify more clearly the wider LAA indicators that impact most directly on child poverty. Children England and NCVYS support the proposal that in cases where local authorities do not choose to have a specific child poverty target in their LAA, performance against all National Indicators should be reported and used for purposes of assessment in relation to child poverty by the local public service inspectorates through the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA).

The representation of stakeholders on Children's Trust Boards needs to reflect that a wide range all policy areas and services are involved in reducing both child and adult poverty, such as housing, health and employment, education and training.

It is worth noting that local authorities across the country have chosen national performance indicators that relate specifically to children and young people. This provides a clear indication that local authorities realise both the significance of good services for children and young people and how important children and young people are to the future of local communities.

Additional considerations

The Government faces a key challenge in ensuring that proposed legislation and policy across Whitehall does not conflict with the vision of eradicating child poverty by the year 2020. Children England and NCVYS strongly support the End Child Poverty Coalition's suggestion that all government policy, both nationally and locally, should be 'poverty-proofed' to ensure it takes into consideration the actions developed in the forthcoming child poverty strategy. The recent publication of the Child Health Strategy is a clear example of where health inequalities among children and young people can be linked to the ending child poverty agenda.

The forthcoming Welfare Reform Bill is a further example of where child poverty-proofing needs to be built-in into policy and legislative developments. The tough penalties proposed in the Welfare Bill, such as removing benefits for lone parents who do not return to work, could push such parents into 'in-work' poverty, making them financially worse off in the long term and seriously undermine the Government's pledge to end child poverty by 2020. Increased conditionality and the removal of benefits as sanctions are likely to do little to address the numerous barriers many lone parents face when trying to move to sustainable work. Furthermore, in times of recession lone parents searching for employment will be competing with more flexible, higher skilled claimants who have been made redundant. The Government should further recognise that moves into poor quality, low paid, irregular work can be disruptive for families, and often it is the families who experience frequent moves between working and not working who end up in the most severe poverty.

A major challenge for the Government will be to ensure that the current economic downturn does not impede commitment and investment in working towards eradicating child poverty by 2020, nor undermine the existing work to halve child poverty by 2010. Government support and engagement with the voluntary sector will be more crucial than ever before and it is fundamental that in times of recession investment in preventative services provided by the voluntary sector are not substantially reduced or overlooked.

Children England and NCVYS are grateful for the opportunity to comment on these legislative proposals prior to the introduction of the forthcoming child poverty Bill and look forward to working with the DCSF and other central government departments more closely in the future to help ensure that child poverty is eradicated once and for all.

For more information on any element of this response, please contact Children England's Policy and Information Officer, Sophie Griffiths on 020 7833 3319 or email sophie@childrenengland.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

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Supplementary information

Children England

Children England is an umbrella organisation whose members are all voluntary and community organisations that work with children, young people and their families. They range from very large national organisations to small locally based charities. Between them they invest over £500 million in direct services. They work in different ways, in and across various disciplines, and with different groups of children, but they share the aim of improving the quality of life for children.

www.childrenengland.org.uk

NCVYS

The National Council for Voluntary Youth Services is a diverse and growing network of over 170 national organisations and regional and local networks that work with and for young people. NCVYS is the only national independent body that represents voluntary and community youth organisations in England. Through the work that we do, we are helping such organisations to build their capacity to deliver quality youth work.

Our mission is to ensure the development and recognition of a vibrant, sound and diverse voluntary and community sector that involves, empowers and meets the needs of all young people.

www.ncvys.org.uk

The Speaking Out project

Speaking Out, a partnership between Children England and the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), has been funded by the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) in the Cabinet Office since April 2006. OTS recently confirmed that funding for the project will be extended until March 2011.

The aims of the Speaking Out project are:

- To provide a credible voice for the children and young people voluntary and community sector (CYPVCS);
- To work collaboratively with government to ensure that the voices of Children England and NCVYS members are included in policy making across departments who do not regularly engage with organisations working with children and young people; and
- To encourage best practice and avoid duplication

Speaking Out has aimed to develop closer links between government departments and the voluntary and community sector in delivering cross departmental plans such as Every Child Matters and in the direct implementation of initiatives which affect children and young people. In order to do this, Speaking Out has so far concentrated particularly on policy agendas emerging from the Home Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Communities and Local Government, the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury.

Some recent achievements of the project include:

- Producing a range of policy briefings to help inform the CYPVCS of issues which affect their work but which fall outside of the DCSF's direct remit. Topics include knife, gun and gang crime, social exclusion, access to services in rural areas, public service delivery, community cohesion, local government reform, placeshaping, rural migrant children, community empowerment and the 2012 Olympic legacy.
- Organising a number a number of events including a national conference in December 2008, attracting key note speakers including David Blunkett MP and Kevin Brennan MP and attended by a range of our members, civil servants and local government representatives.
- Publishing research mapping the size and scope of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector. The report, *Every Organisation Matters*, was undertaken by a team from the University of Hull and found that the sector employs one in three of the total voluntary sector workforce and generates income in excess of £15billion a year.
- Piloting a small grants programme aimed at enabling voluntary and community organisations working with children and young people (aged 0 to 25) in England to apply for small grants to deliver one-off projects or activities in their local communities. The grants funded the development and implementation of new activities or extensions of existing projects that aim to raise the voice of the children, young people's and voluntary and community sector, focusing on three key themes: knife, gun and gang crime; substance misuse and access to activities in rural and urban areas.