



HOUSE OF LORDS

# Library Note

## **Debate on 14th May: the wellbeing of children and families**

This Library Note aims to provide background reading for the debate to be held on Thursday 14th May:

### **“To call attention to Her Majesty’s Government’s policies on the wellbeing of children and families”**

This note examines the government's framework for children's services—Every Child Matters and the Children's Plan—brought in by the new Department for Children, Schools and Families. The government's aim to end child poverty is integral to the wellbeing of children and this note includes details on the progress of its targets. Finally, several reports produced by a number of organisations on the wellbeing of children are highlighted along with an outline of international perspectives on child wellbeing.

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## 1. Background

Children's wellbeing has been a considerable focus of attention in recent years resulting in the publication of numerous policy reports, academic reports, good practice guidelines and campaigns from various non-government organisations. Increasingly, comparative studies also enable assessments of the situation in different countries. The consensus appears to be that child wellbeing includes various factors that affect children's lives and enable them to reach their full potential. A definition given by UNICEF, in their report on child wellbeing across different countries is:

When we seek to measure children's wellbeing what we really seek to know is whether children are adequately clothed and housed and fed and protected, whether their circumstances are such that they are likely to become all that they are capable of becoming, or whether they are disadvantaged in ways that make it difficult or impossible for them to participate fully in life and opportunities of the world around them. Above all we seek to know whether children feel loved, cherished, special and supported, within the family and community, and whether the family and community are being supported in this task by public policy and resources.<sup>1</sup>

Further detail on the report is provided in section 5.2 below.

Since 2004, government policies on the wellbeing of children have been based around the Every Child Matters framework, which in turn is underpinned by the Children Act 2004.

### 1.1 The progress of the Every Child Matters framework

The *Every Child Matters* green paper (Cm 5860) was published on 8th September 2003. On the same day, the government published *Keeping Children Safe: The Government's Response to the Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report and Joint Chief Inspectors' Report Safeguarding Children* (Cm 5861). The inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié was led by Lord Laming, the report of which was published on 28th January 2003: *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Lord Laming* (Cm 5730).

The *Every Child Matters* green paper, which refers to England only, produced a widespread debate about services for children, young people and families and the consultation included diverse groups including people working in children's services, parents, children and young people. Following the consultation, the government published *Every Child Matters: Next Steps* (June 2004). This document outlined the views emerging from the consultation and described the first steps being taken to implement some of the non-legislative proposals in the green paper intended to promote the wellbeing of children. The report was also published alongside the Children Bill and provided an overview of the content of the Bill.

Finally, *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (November 2004) was published alongside the Children Act 2004. This report provided the new policy framework around which all children's services would eventually operate.

The Every Child Matters framework is based upon the five outcomes that children and young people themselves identified as key to wellbeing in childhood and later life. The

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Children's Fund, *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child wellbeing in rich countries* (February 2007), p 39

outcomes are listed below along with definitions that were developed by the government in consultation with the statutory, voluntary and community sectors.

- Being healthy                      Physically healthy  
Mentally and emotionally healthy  
Sexually healthy  
Healthy lifestyles  
Choose not to take illegal drugs  
*Parents, carers and families promote healthy choices*
  
- Staying safe                        Safe from maltreatment, neglect, violence and sexual exploitation  
Safe from accidental injury and death  
Safe from bullying and discrimination  
Safe from crime and anti-social behaviour in and out of school  
Have security, stability and are cared for  
*Parents, carers and families provide safe homes and stability*
  
- Enjoying and achieving        Ready for school  
Attend and enjoy school  
Achieve stretching national educational standards at primary school  
Achieve personal and social development and enjoy recreation  
Achieve stretching national education standards at secondary school  
*Parents, carers and families support learning*
  
- Making a positive contribution    Engage in decision-making and support the community and environment  
Engage in law-abiding and positive behaviour in and out of school  
Develop positive relationships and choose not to bully and discriminate  
Develop self-confidence and successfully deal with significant life changes and challenges  
Develop enterprising behaviour  
*Parents, carers and families promote positive behaviour*
  
- Achieving economic wellbeing    Engage in further education, employment or training on leaving school  
Ready for employment  
Live in decent homes and sustainable communities  
Access to transport and material goods  
Live in households free from low income  
*Parents, carers and families are supported to be economically active<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> HM Government, *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (November 2004) p 9

Around the same time as the five outcomes were identified, the Every Child Matters website was launched providing an up-to-date resource on the new framework for professionals working with children, parents and children and young people themselves.<sup>3</sup>

*Every Child Matters: Change for Children* states: “Our ambition is to improve those outcomes for all children and to narrow the gap between those who do well and those who do not”.<sup>4</sup> The five outcomes are “given legal force in the Children Act 2004 as the components of wellbeing [and] are central to the programme of change”.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 The Children Act 2004

The Children Bill was introduced in the House of Lords on 3rd March 2004 and received Royal Assent on 15th November 2004. The Act provided the legislative framework for improving services focused around the needs of children, young people and families.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. A re-focusing of the framework

In 2007, two key reforms took place that further altered the policy landscape for children and young people: the creation of a new government department; and the publication of a new strategy for children. As with the information on Every Child Matters and the Children Act, most of the information in this section of the Note applies to England only.

### 2.1 The Department for Children, Schools and Families

On the day he came into office in June 2007 the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, announced the creation of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), replacing the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). In a Written Statement the Prime Minister said:

Children and families are the bedrock of our society. The Government’s aim is to ensure that every child gets the best possible start in life, receiving the ongoing support and protection that they—and their families—need to allow them to fulfil their potential.

To drive forward progress towards this goal, I am today announcing the formation of a new Department for Children, Schools and Families, for the first time bringing together key aspects of policy affecting children and young people.

The new Department will play a strong role both in taking forward policy relating to children and young people, and coordinating and leading work across Government on youth and family policy.

High quality and tailored education for all young people will be at the heart of the new Department—which will take on pre-19 education policy responsibilities, from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), working closely with the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills to ensure successful delivery of

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk>

<sup>4</sup> *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*, p 4

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*, p 8

<sup>6</sup> Further information on the Children Bill can be found in House of Lords Library Note (LLN 2004/003) *The Children Bill* (24th March 2004) and House of Commons Research Paper (HCRP 04/68), *Children Bill* (10th September 2004).

the 14 to 19 reforms. Funding for 16 to 19 education will in future go to schools and colleges via the local authority education budget. Raising school standards for all children and young people at all ages will be an overriding priority of the new Government.

The new Department will assume responsibility for promoting the wellbeing, safety, protection and care of all young people—including through policy responsibility for children’s social services.

It will also be responsible for leading the Government’s strategy on family policy—including parenting—and, working with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and HM Treasury, will take forward the Government’s strategy for ending child poverty.<sup>7</sup>

The Prime Minister also announced that the DCSF would assume responsibility for promoting the wider contribution of young people to their communities and lead on the prevention of youth offending. He went on to list other areas of joint responsibility for the new department including: promoting the health of all children and young people with the Department of Health; promoting youth sport with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; tackling drug use with the Home Office and the Department of Health; addressing youth homelessness and supported housing with the Department for Communities and Local Government.

The DCSF website summarises its role as “leading the whole network of people who work with or for children and young people. To do this, we put the needs and views of families, children and young people at the centre of everything we do”.<sup>8</sup>

Following the creation of the new Department, on 6th November 2007 a new select committee was formed in the House of Commons to enable scrutiny of the Department’s work. On 9th January 2008, the Children, Schools and Families Committee held an evidence session with the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, and senior officials from the Department to investigate “the reasoning behind the new department and the contents of the Children’s Plan”.<sup>9</sup>

The committee welcomed the government’s recognition that “all the services for which it [DCSF] is responsible play a significant part in helping children and young people develop and address difficulties that they may face, and that those services need to be co-ordinated rather than operate in isolation if they are to be as effective as possible”.<sup>10</sup> However it warned that the “unique” form of joint responsibility with other departments that will be required of the new Department “might mean no effective responsibility, with each part of the system doing its own work but with no-one ensuring that it does all add up to coherent policy and actions”.<sup>11</sup> The committee went on to point out that joint working is crucial at the local level as well as nationally to ensure the success of the government’s plans.

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<sup>7</sup> HC Hansard, 28th June 2007, cols 36–7WS

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/aboutus/>

<sup>9</sup> House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, *The Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Children’s Plan* (24th April 2008), session 2007–08, HC 213, p 7

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p 11

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, p 10

## 2.2 The Children's Plan

Shortly after it was created, the DCSF published the *Children's Plan: Building brighter futures* (Cm 7280, 11th December 2007). The Children's Plan sets out the Department's goals for improving children's and young people's lives, asserting that, "by 2020 we want England to be the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up".<sup>12</sup>

The Children's Plan was informed by widespread debate with parents, professionals, children and young people across the country, as well as recommendations from three Expert Groups that were established to advise the new Department. Consequently, five principles were developed to underpin the Children's Plan:

- Government does not bring up children—parents do—so government needs to do more to back parents and families
- All children have the potential to succeed and should go as far as their talents can take them
- Children and young people need to enjoy their childhood as well as grow up prepared for adult life
- Services need to be shaped by and responsive to children, young people and families, not designed around professional boundaries
- It is always better to prevent failure than tackle a crisis later<sup>13</sup>

The Children's Plan is based on six strategic objectives to improve the lives of children and young people, which are:

- Secure the health and wellbeing of children and young people
- Safeguard the young and vulnerable
- Achieve world-class standards
- Close the gap in education achievement for children from disadvantaged backgrounds
- Ensure young people are participating and achieving their potential to 18 and beyond
- Keep children and young people on the path to success<sup>14</sup>

In his first evidence session with the Children's, Schools and Families Select Committee, the Secretary of State was asked why the Children's Plan was structured around a new set of strategic objectives rather than the five Every Child Matters outcomes (as outlined above in section 1.1). The Secretary of State explained that the Children's Plan is

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<sup>12</sup> Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Children's Plan: Building brighter futures* (Cm 7280, 11th December 2007), p 15

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, p 5

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, p 15. More information on the Children's Plan is available on the website: <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/childrensplan>.

structured around the Department's five Public Service Agreement (PSA) objectives.<sup>15</sup> However, both the Plan and the Department are "informed by the reality of Every Child Matters on the ground in local areas". The committee argued that this "is unsatisfactory. The Department needs to be clear for the sake of its own work and that of the wider children and families workforce which objectives it is primarily working towards".<sup>16</sup> The committee also warned that the "lack of priority amongst the objectives and the absence of a timetable for implementation are weaknesses which need to be rectified, otherwise the Children's Plan runs the risk of being simply a wish list rather than the mission for the Department of which the Secretary of State spoke".<sup>17</sup>

Since these comments were made, the DCSF have set out the links between the Every Child Matters outcomes, the Department's PSA objectives and the Departmental Strategic Objectives outlined in the Children's Plan (see Annex 1).

The Children's Plan received a positive response from those campaigning on behalf of children. For example, Bob Reitemeier, Chief Executive of The Children's Society, commented: "The pledge to make 'Britain the best place in the world for children to grow up' is exactly the right ambition to set for our society. The responsibility for childhood rests with us all and we are encouraged that the Children's Plan looks beyond education to address fundamental areas such as parents and play".<sup>18</sup>

Kate Green, the Chief Executive of Child Poverty Action Group said: "The wide range of measures announced today recognises many of the unmet needs of children in poverty. We welcome the focus on disadvantage and early years support, with new funding for disabled children and for pre-school childcare".<sup>19</sup>

Anne Longfield, Chief Executive of 4Children, said: "The Children's Plan is one of the most important and radical changes of this Government so far and one which has the potential to transform the lives of millions of children for the better but will need determination and investment if we are to make it a reality".<sup>20</sup>

### **2.3 The Children's Plan: One Year On**

On 11th December 2008, exactly one year after the publication of the Children's Plan, the DCSF published *The Children's Plan: One Year On and The Children's Plan: A Progress Report*. In the press notice accompanying publication, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families said:

One year into the Children's Plan and there is much to celebrate and be proud of. But at the same time there are still too many young people not fulfilling their potential, too many schools where standards are not high enough and we can

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<sup>15</sup> Progress on the PSA targets can be found in DCSF, *Autumn Performance Report* (December 2008).

<sup>16</sup> House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, *The Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Children's Plan* (24th April, 2008), session 2007–08, HC 213, p 13

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*, p 12

<sup>18</sup> 'Statement regarding the Government's 10-year Children's Plan', The Children's Society website, 11th December 2007:

[http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/whats\\_happening/media\\_office/latest\\_news/Statement\\_regarding\\_the\\_Governments\\_10year\\_Childrens\\_Plan\\_5144\\_pr.html](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/whats_happening/media_office/latest_news/Statement_regarding_the_Governments_10year_Childrens_Plan_5144_pr.html)

<sup>19</sup> 'End to child poverty key to success of Children's Plan', CPAG website, 11th December 2007: <http://www.cpag.org.uk/press/111207.htm>

<sup>20</sup> 'Radical Children's Plan to transform the face of childhood in Britain', 4Children website, 21st December 2007: <http://www.4children.org.uk/information/show/ref/1143>

never be satisfied until we have done all we can to protect every child from abuse, harm and neglect.

We now need to invest in all those who work with children, and build capacity to work across boundaries so that our services are not just about providing a safety net for the vulnerable—but also about unlocking the potential of every child. Local leadership is vital to embed the Children’s Plan—we need to win the hearts and minds of everyone who works with children.

This is not just about the Government churning out policy papers—every one of these is an essential part of the jigsaw. The immediate lessons of Haringey are being addressed, but the wider vision remains as important as it ever was—it takes the whole community, working together, to make every child safe, healthy, enjoying their childhood and preparing for their future.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Child poverty

Delivering the annual Beveridge lecture in March 1999 at Toynbee Hall, the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, announced: “Our historic aim will be for ours to be the first generation to end child poverty. It will take a generation. It is a 20-year mission, but I believe it can be done”.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the government set several targets to reduce child poverty by a quarter between 1998/99 and 2004/05, as a step towards halving it by 2010/11 and a goal of eradicating it by 2020.

In HM Treasury’s *Child Poverty Review* (July 2004) the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, said:

In 1997, one in every three babies born in Britain were born into low-income households—born not into opportunity but into poverty. And we know that an infant who then grows up in a poor family is less likely to stay on at school, or even to attend school regularly, less likely to get qualifications and go to college, more likely to be trapped in the worst job or no job at all, more likely to be trapped in a cycle of deprivation that is lifelong, unable to reach their full potential—a young child’s chances crippled even before their life’s journey has barely begun.

So action to eradicate child poverty is the obligation this generation owes the next. Tackling child poverty is, for us, the critical first step in ensuring that each child has the chance to develop their potential to the full.<sup>23</sup>

The government’s strategy to tackle child poverty can be divided into four themes, as outlined in a key government document, *Ending Child Poverty: Everybody’s business*,

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<sup>21</sup> ‘Children’s Plan: One Year On’, DCSF website, 11th December 2008: [http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2008\\_0282](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0282). The full press notice summarises key achievements made over the previous year and announced action to be taken over the coming year.

<sup>22</sup> *Beveridge Lecture*, 18th March 1999, Toynbee Hall: [http://www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/Publication\\_files/Tony%20Blair%20Child%20Poverty%20Speech.doc](http://www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/Publication_files/Tony%20Blair%20Child%20Poverty%20Speech.doc)

<sup>23</sup> HM Treasury, *Child Poverty Review* (July 2004), p 3

published in March 2008:

1. Helping people who can work to move into employment and progress in work
2. Providing additional resources to make sure that work pays and to help families who cannot work
3. Ensuring that communities are safe, sustainable places where families can thrive
4. Improving opportunities and outcomes for children from low-income families<sup>24</sup>

This report also considered: the causes and consequences of child poverty; the costs associated with childhood experiences of poverty for both individuals and society; the impact of government action so far; and policy direction for the future. The report concludes that:

The Government's vision for the next decade is a situation where everybody plays their role in tackling child poverty. The Government, communities, local authorities, service providers, employers and families all have an important part to play in a 'contract out of poverty'. The Government believes that only through working in partnership can child poverty be eradicated.<sup>25</sup>

The government have produced a number of reports considering child poverty over the past few years.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.1 Progress on the child poverty targets

The measurement used for the 2004/05 child poverty target was the standard definition of living in a household with an income that is below 60 per cent of the median household income. In 1998/99 there were 3.1 million children living in poverty when measured on a before housing costs (BHC) income measure, and 4.1 million when measured on an after housing costs (AHC) income measure. In 2004/05 this had fallen to 2.4 million BHC and 3.4 million AHC. This means that the target to reduce child poverty by a quarter by 2004/05 was not met. To have met the target a further 100,000 children should have been lifted out of poverty, when measured by BHC and a further 300,000 when measured by AHC.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> HM Treasury, DWP and DCSF, *Ending Child Poverty: Everybody's business* (March 2008), p 33

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, p 66

<sup>26</sup> These include: Lisa Harker, *Delivering on Child Poverty: what would it take? A report for the Department for Work and Pensions* (Cm 6951, November 2006); DWP, *Working for Children* (Cm 7067, March 2007); DWP, *Opportunity For All: Indicators update 2007* (October 2007); DWP, *Ending Child Poverty: 'Thinking 2020': a report and think-tank pieces from the Child Poverty Unit conference*, Working paper No 56 (2008).

<sup>27</sup> Further details are provided in the House of Commons Library Standard Note (SN/EP/4759), *The child poverty target 2004/05: What happened?* (18th June 2008).

The reaction of campaign groups to the failure to meet the first child poverty target was one of disappointment. For example, Kate Green, Chief Executive of the Child Poverty Action Group, said:

We're disappointed that the Government has fallen short of its target, but we should not forget that in the last six years 700,000 children have been lifted out of relative poverty. It's not enough, but without this ambitious target and the extra resources the Government has committed to tackling child poverty, it's unlikely that such progress would ever have been made.<sup>28</sup>

The children's charity Barnardo's said:

Barnardo's is extremely disappointed that the Government has failed to meet its own target to reduce the number of children living in poverty by a quarter... This is bad news for Britain's poorest children as it blights their childhoods and their future life chances. Childhood poverty cannot be justified in the UK, which is the fourth richest in the industrialised world.<sup>29</sup>

In March 2006, shortly after the 2004/05 child poverty figures were released, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) drew together a range of social policy experts and produced a report examining what was needed to meet the child poverty targets. Summarising the damage that child poverty causes, the report said:

... the scale of the problem is not just a statistical artefact. Children on low incomes are unable to enjoy the basic living standards that their peers take for granted. Some lack even fundamental necessities like adequate food and warm clothing, and certain groups—including homeless children and children of refugees—are particularly vulnerable to severe hardship. Moreover, most children in poverty experience it as a persistent rather than a temporary condition: over two-thirds of those below the poverty threshold at any one time have been in poverty for at least three of the past four years.

Nor does child poverty damage only those whom it affects directly. Society must pay for not ending child poverty. As well as the shame of allowing it in a rich country, more tangible costs include the cost of remedial services and the foregone taxes and benefits resulting from the reduced future employment and earnings prospects of those who grow up poor. Recent research has shown that the intergenerational 'knock-on' effect is escalating: those who grew up poor in the 1980s are suffering greater disadvantage in mid-life than those who grew up poor in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup>

The JRF report commented that current policies are unlikely to produce substantial further reductions in child poverty. The report also included research conducted by the

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<sup>28</sup> 'Child poverty target: campaigners disappointed but Ministers urged to make faster progress' CPAG website, (9th March 2006): <http://www.cpag.org.uk/campaigns/press090306.htm>

<sup>29</sup> 'Government failure to meet targets 'unjustifiable', Barnardo's website', (9th March 2006): [http://www.barnardos.org.uk/news\\_and\\_events/media\\_centre/press\\_releases/press\\_releases\\_archive.htm?ref=19709&year=2006&month=3](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/news_and_events/media_centre/press_releases/press_releases_archive.htm?ref=19709&year=2006&month=3)

<sup>30</sup> Donald Hirsch, *What will it take to end child poverty?: Findings*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (July 2006) p 2

Institute for Fiscal Studies to estimate the required investment to meet the child poverty targets. These figures were updated in February 2009 in a report which states:

Projections based on current policies suggest that child poverty will fall from 2.9 million to 2.3 million by 2010—600,000 short of the target... To meet its target for 2010, the Government would have to invest an estimated £4.2 billion a year in benefits and tax credits above its present plans. The allocation of an additional £2 billion since 2006 has been offset by an unexpected rise in child poverty between 2004 and 2007 and the increased costs of the recession.<sup>31</sup>

Further details on the remaining two child poverty targets, and the new measure to be used, can be found in the House of Commons Library Standard Note (SN/EP/3314), *Progress towards the 2010/11 Child Poverty Target, the 2020 Target & the Child Poverty Bill* (9th February 2009).

In February 2008, the House of Commons Work and Pensions Select Committee published a report of their inquiry to assess the government's progress towards the target to halve child poverty by 2010/11 and whether current government employment policies were the right way forward.<sup>32</sup> The committee concluded that the target could only be met if further investment was forthcoming. The report included a range of recommendations on the package of support and investment required. The government response to the report was published in June 2008, in which it reiterates its commitment to tackling child poverty and outlines its response to the committee's recommendations.<sup>33</sup>

The most recent statistics on child poverty were published by the government on 7th May 2009. These show that in 2007/08 there was no change compared with 2006/07 in the number of children living in poverty using the before housing costs measure. Using the after housing costs measure the number had increased by 0.1 million.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.2 The Child Poverty Bill

Initially announced by the Prime Minister in his speech to the Labour Party conference on 23rd September 2008 and included in the Queen's Speech on 3rd December 2008, the government announced the Child Poverty Bill for the 2008/09 legislative agenda. The Bill aims to:

Give new impetus to Government's commitment and ensure a focus across government on ending child poverty for the long term... The Child Poverty Bill will enshrine in law the commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2020 and help to ensure that we stay on course and take action now to tackle the causes as well as the consequences of poverty.<sup>35</sup>

In January 2009, the government's Child Poverty Unit published a consultation paper setting out its "vision" towards the 2020 target and how this can best be reflected in

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<sup>31</sup> Donald Hirsch, *Ending child poverty in a changing economy: Findings*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (February 2009) p 1

<sup>32</sup> House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, *The best start in life? Alleviating deprivation, improving social mobility, and eradicating child poverty* (3rd March 2008), session 2007–08, HC 42-1

<sup>33</sup> House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, *Government response to 'The best start in life? Alleviating deprivation, improving social mobility, and eradicating child poverty'* (12th June 2008) HC 580

<sup>34</sup> DWP, *Households Below Average Income 1994/95–2007/08* (7th May 2007)

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.commonleader.gov.uk/output/page2654.asp>

legislation.<sup>36</sup> The consultation closed on 11th March 2009. The Bill has not yet been published.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4. The Good Childhood Inquiry

The Good Childhood Inquiry was commissioned by The Children's Society in September 2006 and was the UK's first independent national inquiry into childhood. Its aims were "to renew society's understanding of modern childhood and to inform, improve and inspire all our relationships with children". Evidence was collected from more than 30,000 people, including over 20,000 children, and the final report from the inquiry was published on 5th February 2009.<sup>38</sup> The inquiry report argues that excessive individualism is causing a range of problems for children including: high family break-up, teenage unkindness, commercial pressures towards premature sexualisation, unprincipled advertising, too much competition in education and acceptance of income inequality. Some of the key findings include:

- The proportion of children experiencing significant emotional or behavioural difficulties rose from 8% in 1974 to 16% in 1999, and has remained at that level
- 70% of children agree "parents getting on well is one of the most important factors in raising happy children" yet only 30% of parents agree with the statement
- Children with step-parents or a single parent are, on average, 50% more likely to suffer short-term problems with academic achievement, self-esteem, behaviour, depression or anxiety
- Only a quarter of the children who are seriously disturbed by mental health difficulties get any kind of specialist help
- Children who spend 18 hours taking a programme that teaches children to manage their own feelings and how to understand and care for others, are half as likely to experience depression over the next three years and also do better academically
- Britain and the U.S. are more unequal than other advanced countries and have lower average wellbeing among their children

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<sup>36</sup> Child Poverty Unit, *Ending child poverty: Making it happen*, 28th January 2009

<sup>37</sup> Further background on the Child Poverty Bill can be found in the House of Commons Library Standard Note (SN/EP/3314), *Progress towards the 2010/11 Child Poverty Target, the 2020 Target & the Child Poverty Bill* (9th February 2009): [http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/all\\_about\\_us/how\\_we\\_do\\_it/the\\_good\\_childhood\\_inquiry/about\\_the\\_good\\_childhood\\_inquiry/2254.html](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/all_about_us/how_we_do_it/the_good_childhood_inquiry/about_the_good_childhood_inquiry/2254.html).

<sup>38</sup> Professor Lord Richard Layard and Professor Judy Dunn, *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* (5th February 2009)

The report includes 30 recommendations from the inquiry panel to different groups, which include:

- parents should make a long term commitment to each other, love their children, each other and establish boundaries for children
- teachers should help children to develop happy, likeable social personalities, base discipline on mutual respect and pilot new tests on emotional and behavioural well being
- the media should rethink the amount of violence they put out, the unbalanced impression they give of the risks that children face from strangers and the exaggerated picture they portray of young people threatening our social stability
- Government should:
  - Offer high quality parenting classes, psychological support and adolescent mental health services
  - Automatically assess the mental health of children entering local authority care or custody
  - Raise the pay and status of all people who work with children including teachers and child care workers, and give a salary supplement to teachers taking jobs in deprived areas
  - Build a high quality youth centre for every 5,000 young people
  - Ban adverts for alcohol or unhealthy food on television before 9 pm
  - The government must achieve its target for the reduction of child poverty
- All Society should take a more positive attitude to children. Welcome them into society and help them<sup>39</sup>

The House of Lords held a debate on the Good Childhood Inquiry shortly after the inquiry report was published. The debate was introduced by the Bishop of Leicester, who is also the chair of the trustees of The Children's Society. He highlighted the report's key findings, drawing particular attention to the fact that "after the United States, Britain is the most unequal of the rich countries". He went on to say that "combinations of inequalities can have a drastic effect on children's life chances".<sup>40</sup> The Bishop of Leicester also pointed to the "excessive individualism" identified in the report.<sup>41</sup> Responding to the debate, Baroness Morgan of Drefelin, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, said it "could be argued that the five principles of the Children's Plan strike at the heart of the very individualism that The Children's Society report is concerned about".<sup>42</sup> Baroness Morgan went on to outline the government's action on children and young people's wellbeing in recent years, concluding: "We should celebrate children and young people...and all that they achieve. The Government will welcome this report and continue to have the very highest aspirations for all children in this country".<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid*, pp 155–163

<sup>40</sup> HL *Hansard*, 12th February 2009, col 1239

<sup>41</sup> HL *Hansard*, 12th February 2009, col 1242

<sup>42</sup> HL *Hansard*, 12th February 2009, col 1271

<sup>43</sup> HL *Hansard*, 12th February 2009, col 1275

## 5. An international perspective

Attempts have been made to compare the wellbeing of children in different countries, but they are limited by the availability of internationally comparable data. Child wellbeing also has to be considered in the context of each individual country. The UNICEF report on child wellbeing, described below in section 5.2, takes as a starting point the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which has been ratified by all UN member states except for the United States and Somalia. It is the only international human rights treaty to include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and sets out in detail what every child needs to have a safe, happy and fulfilled childhood.

### 5.1 The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>44</sup>

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is an international human rights treaty that grants all children and young people a comprehensive set of rights. The following description of the Convention is taken from the UNICEF website:

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the first legally binding international instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights. In 1989, world leaders decided that children needed a special convention just for them because people under 18 years old often need special care and protection that adults do not. The leaders also wanted to make sure that the world recognized that children have human rights too.

The Convention sets out these rights in 54 articles and two Optional Protocols. It spells out the basic human rights that children everywhere have: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. The four core principles of the Convention are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. Every right spelled out in the Convention is inherent to the human dignity and harmonious development of every child. The Convention protects children's rights by setting standards in health care; education; and legal, civil and social services.

By agreeing to undertake the obligations of the Convention (by ratifying or acceding to it), national governments have committed themselves to protecting and ensuring children's rights and they have agreed to hold themselves accountable for this commitment before the international community. States parties to the Convention are obliged to develop and undertake all actions and policies in the light of the best interests of the child.<sup>45</sup>

The UK signed the Convention on 19th April 1990, ratified it on 16th December 1991 and it came into force in the UK on 15th January 1992. Every state that has ratified the UN Convention is required to report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on how it is fulfilling its human rights obligations. The UK first reported to the UN on 15th March 1994, its second report on 14th September 1999 and its consolidated third and fourth report on 15th July 2007.<sup>46</sup> The DCSF coordinated the writing of the 2007 report, which

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<sup>44</sup> The text of the Convention can be found at: <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

<sup>45</sup> A description of the Convention can be found at <http://www.unicef.org/crc/>; a summary of the Convention can be accessed at: [http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights\\_overview.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf).

<sup>46</sup> All the reports can be accessed at <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/strategy/uncrc/process/>.

includes responses to the committee's concluding observations, as well as details on progress made against the convention since the last report.

## 5.2 UNICEF report

In 2007, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) published *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child wellbeing in rich countries*. The report "provides a comprehensive assessment of the lives and wellbeing of children and young people in 21 nations of the industrialised world".<sup>47</sup> The report measures and compares child wellbeing under six dimensions: material wellbeing; health and safety; education; peer and family relationships; behaviours and risks; and young people's own subjective sense of wellbeing.

The UNICEF report received much attention as it positioned the UK at the bottom of the table, just behind the United States—both countries being positioned in the bottom third of the rankings for five of the six dimensions reviewed. The Netherlands were top of the table of overall child wellbeing, followed by Sweden, Denmark and Finland (see Annex 2 for the full table). The report noted that:

No single dimension of wellbeing stands as a reliable proxy for child wellbeing as a whole and several OECD countries find themselves with widely differing rankings for different dimensions of child wellbeing.

There is no obvious relationship between levels of child wellbeing and GDP per capita. The Czech Republic, for example, achieves a higher overall rank for child wellbeing than several much wealthier countries including France, Austria, the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>48</sup>

The UNICEF report acknowledges the data limitations and "prominent gaps" within the report. Gaps include children's exposure to violence in the home; children's mental health and emotional wellbeing may be under-represented, as are age and gender differences.<sup>49</sup> The age of much of the data was identified as problematic by many external commentators.<sup>50</sup>

Further gaps in the UNICEF report were identified during a debate on the report in the House of Lords. Introducing the debate, Lord Northbourne acknowledged that some of the data was several years old and also identified the following gaps: the rights of a child to a secure family life; the duties and obligations of parents to their child; and the challenge of motivating and engaging parents who are "short-changing their child".<sup>51</sup> Lord Northbourne called on the government to state publicly their support for two-parent families living together to bring up their children; parents who make such a long-term commitment to each other "are doing the nation as well as their child a service, and they should be encouraged, supported and rewarded accordingly". Finally, Lord Northbourne called on the government to "set a target to reduce by an agreed percentage over the next 10 years a proportion of the nation's children who grow up in families that deny

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<sup>47</sup> UNICEF, *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child wellbeing in rich countries* (February 2007), p 2

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, p 3

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, p 3

<sup>50</sup> See, for example: 'Children's wellbeing: Face it—then fix it', *The Guardian* (15th February 2007): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2007/feb/15/children.comment>; and 'A turning point in the history of our country' —or kids' stuff?', *The Daily Telegraph* (17th February 2007): <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3637629/A-turning-point-in-our-history---or-kids-stuff.html>.

<sup>51</sup> HL *Hansard*, 29th March 2007, cols 1809–10

them the opportunity to develop to their full potential emotionally, mentally and physically”.

Responding to the debate Lord Adonis, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills, said that “the Government are not in the least complacent” about the observations in the report and that “to bring about change in many of these areas is a long-term project which is not susceptible to quick fixes”. On the issue of family structure, Lord Adonis said that the government’s policies “are resolutely geared to supporting parents, whatever their individual circumstances... [and] our task is to give all parents and carers, without discrimination, the support that they need to provide children with the best possible start in life”.<sup>52</sup>

Lord Adonis also pointed out that “the old data in the UNICEF report mean that there is no mention of the fact that, since 1997, relative poverty in the UK has fallen at a greater rate than anywhere else in Europe”. And that this was due to “significant” government expenditure on a range of measures.<sup>53</sup>

The report received a mixed response in the media and from children’s organisations. For example, 4Children stated that “UNICEF’s report is a sad reflection of the way that Britain has traditionally treated its children and of our society’s attitudes to children and young people”.<sup>54</sup> Some organisations link the high poverty rate in the UK with the low placement in the UNICEF table. The Chief Executive of Barnardo’s said:

...child poverty is still acute in the UK, lying behind so many of the factors which place the UK at the bottom of the UNICEF report... The report makes for depressing reading, but it does not come as a surprise. The evidence shows that children who grow up in poverty are more vulnerable: they are more likely to have poor health; to have learning and behavioural difficulties, to underachieve at school, to become pregnant at an early age and to have lower skills and aspirations and to be low paid or unemployed.<sup>55</sup>

Finally in response to a Parliamentary Question on the government’s view of the UNICEF report, the Minister of State for Education and Skills summarised a range of government initiatives on children’s wellbeing that have been implemented since 1997 including: free early education for 3 and 4 year olds; Children’s Centres in disadvantaged areas; and several policies aimed at schools serving deprived communities.<sup>56</sup>

### **5.3 Report from the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)**

A report providing international comparisons on child wellbeing was recently published by CPAG—a charity that campaigns for the abolition of child poverty in the UK. *Child wellbeing and child poverty: Where the UK stands in the European table* (April 2009),

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<sup>52</sup> HL *Hansard*, 29th March 2007, col 1840

<sup>53</sup> HL *Hansard*, 29th March 2007, col 1839

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.4children.org.uk/information/show/ref/1046>

<sup>55</sup> [http://www.barnardos.org.uk/news\\_and\\_events/media\\_centre/press\\_releases/press\\_releases\\_archive.htm?ref=26944&year=2007&month=2](http://www.barnardos.org.uk/news_and_events/media_centre/press_releases/press_releases_archive.htm?ref=26944&year=2007&month=2)

<sup>56</sup> HC *Hansard*, 5th March 2007, col 1687

was produced by researchers from the University of York. The report begins by defining child wellbeing as:

the quality of childhoods as they are lived. Wellbeing draws in many different factors which affect children's lives including: material conditions; housing and neighbourhoods; how children feel and do at school; their health; exposure to dangerous risks; and the quality of family and classmate relationships children develop. Although child poverty is a different concept to wellbeing, poverty influences each aspect of wellbeing and is a major impediment to delivering better wellbeing.<sup>57</sup>

The researchers produced a league table of 29 European countries. The report includes 43 indicators that are summarised in seven domains of child wellbeing. The domains (with the UK's performance in brackets) are:

- health, including indicators on infant mortality and birth weight (UK: 24th)
- subjective wellbeing, including indicators on how children feel about their lives and health (UK: 21st)
- children's relationships, including indicators on how easy children say they find it to talk to their parents and get on with their classmates (UK: 15th)
- material resources, including indicators on child poverty (UK: 24th)
- behaviour and risk, including indicators on violence and risk behaviour, (UK: 18th)
- education, including indicators on achievement and youth inactivity (UK: 22nd)
- housing and environment, including indicators on overcrowding and housing problems (UK: 17th)

Overall, the UK is ranked 24th of 29 countries. As with the UNICEF report, the Netherlands tops the league, along with other Northern European countries (see Annex 3 for the full league table).

The researchers explored the reasons for different countries' performances and found:

- A relationship exists between economic strain (measured by access to necessities) and overall wellbeing: generally, the greater the strain, the worse the child wellbeing.
- Countries with high overall child wellbeing tend to have more children reporting high life satisfaction.
- A relationship exists between GDP per head and child wellbeing: richer countries tend to have better child wellbeing. Although, the Netherlands

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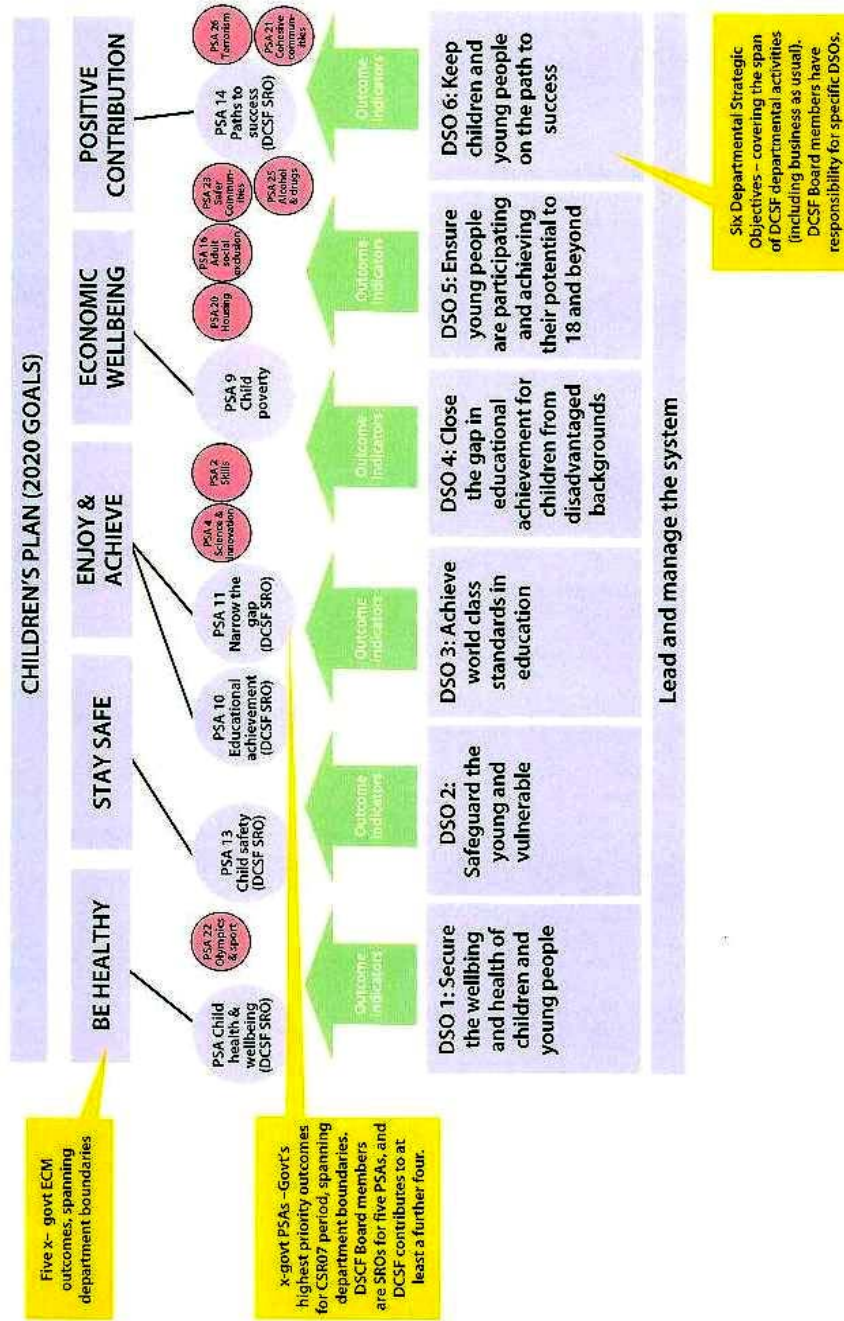
<sup>57</sup> CPAG, [Child wellbeing and child poverty: Where the UK stands in the European table](#) (April 2009), p 2

has higher wellbeing than its GDP would suggest, whereas the UK does less well.

- More equal societies, such as in Scandinavian countries, tend to do better on child wellbeing than less equal societies such as in Eastern Europe or the UK.
- The researchers found no association between the proportion of surveyed children living in lone or step parent families and child wellbeing.
- Countries that devote more resources to families tend to have less child poverty.

The report ends by arguing that the findings “are a justification of policy focused on tackling child poverty and a demand for much more radical action”.

Table 1: Links between Every Child Matters outcomes, Public Service Agreements and Departmental Strategic Objectives.



(Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Departmental Report 2008* (Cm 7391, May 2008), p 10: <http://publications.dcsf.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-AnnualReport-08.pdf>)

## Annex 2

Child well-being in rich countries: a summary table

		Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 3	Dimension 4	Dimension 5	Dimension 6
Dimensions of child well-being	Average ranking position (for all 6 dimensions)	Material well-being	Health and Safety	Educational well-being	Family and peer relationships	Behaviours and risks	Subjective well-being
Netherlands	4.2	10	2	6	3	3	1
Sweden	5.0	1	1	5	15	1	7
Denmark	7.2	4	4	8	9	6	12
Finland	7.5	3	3	4	17	7	11
Spain	8.0	12	6	15	8	5	2
Switzerland	8.3	5	9	14	4	12	6
Norway	8.7	2	8	11	10	13	8
Italy	10.0	14	5	20	1	10	10
Ireland	10.2	19	19	7	7	4	5
Belgium	10.7	7	16	1	5	19	16
Germany	11.2	13	11	10	13	11	9
Canada	11.8	6	13	2	18	17	15
Greece	11.8	15	18	16	11	8	3
Poland	12.3	21	15	3	14	2	19
Czech Republic	12.5	11	10	9	19	9	17
France	13.0	9	7	18	12	14	18
Portugal	13.7	16	14	21	2	15	14
Austria	13.8	8	20	19	16	16	4
Hungary	14.5	20	17	13	6	18	13
United States	18.0	17	21	12	20	20	-
United Kingdom	18.2	18	12	17	21	21	20

OECD countries with insufficient data to be included in the overview: Australia, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, the Slovak Republic, South Korea and Turkey.

(Source: UNICEF, *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries* (2007), p 2: <http://www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf>)

### Annex 3

Table: the child wellbeing index

Rank	Country	Health	Subjective wellbeing	Children's relationships	Material resources	Behaviour and Risk	Education	Housing and environment
1	Netherlands	2	1	1	7	4	4	9
2	Sweden	1	7	3	10	1	9	3
3	Norway	6	8	6	2	2	10	1
4	Iceland	4	9	4	1	3	14	8
5	Finland	12	6	9	4	7	7	4
6	Denmark	3	5	10	9	15	12	5
7	Slovenia	15	16	2	5	13	11	19
8	Germany	17	12	8	12	5	6	16
9	Ireland	14	10	14	20	12	5	2
10	Luxembourg	5	17	19	3	11	16	7
11	Austria	26	2	7	8	19	19	6
12	Cyprus	10			13			11
13	Spain	13	4	17	18	6	20	13
14	Belgium	18	13	18	15	21	1	12
15	France	20	14	28	11	10	13	10
16	Czech Republic	9	22	27	6	20	3	22
17	Slovakia	7	11	22	16	23	17	15
18	Estonia	11	20	12	14	25	2	25
19	Italy	19	18	20	17	8	23	20
20	Poland	8	26	16	26	17	8	23
21	Portugal	21	23	13	21	9	25	18
22	Hungary	23	25	11	23	16	15	21
23	Greece	29	3	23	19	22	21	14
24	United Kingdom	24	21	15	24	18	22	17
25	Romania	27	19	5		24	27	
26	Bulgaria	25	15	24		26	26	
27	Latvia	16	24	26	22	27	18	26
28	Lithuania	22	27	25	25	28	24	24
29	Malta	28	28	21		14		

Notes: Green indicated top third of the table; yellow the middle; and red the bottom. Blank cells are where insufficient data was available. Methods are summarised in the appendix.

(Source: Child Poverty Action Group, *Child wellbeing and child poverty: Where the UK stands in the European table* (Spring 2009), p 3:

<http://www.cpag.org.uk/info/ChildWellbeingandChildPoverty.pdf>)

