

## **Children's Commissioner's Proposals to Support Disadvantaged Children**

*The Children's Commissioner's Office (CCO) has come up with a series of policies to help alleviate poverty and improve the educational attainment of disadvantaged children.*

### **What children have told us**

We have listened to children in the largest ever survey of children the 'Big Ask', with over half a million responses from every part of the country. Children have told us what they think and feel and what worries them, and in return we want to make sure we are delivering for them.

That's why we are focusing on policies that can improve the lives of the most disadvantaged children and give them the chance to reach their full potential. We can do this by supporting the educational attainment of children in poverty, tackling food poverty and hunger, and refocusing the benefit system to children and families.

By putting children at the heart of our recovery from Covid we can create positive change for the most disadvantaged children giving them the best chance to succeed and get on in life.

### **What this means for policy now as we come out of lockdown**

Disadvantaged children have told us their concerns about how poverty can impact on their family and home environment. And we know poverty can impact on demand for social care and be a major driver of differentials in educational outcomes.<sup>1</sup> To make sure we are looking after all children in every part of society, no matter what their start in life, the CCO is seeking to build consensus around a set broad set of pragmatic and evidence-based policies that could be adopted to address child poverty.

That's why we are suggesting policies which will:

- 1) **Support the educational attainment of children in poverty** – helping to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers.
- 2) **Tackle food poverty and hunger** – a manifestation of poverty which has been shown to have a particularly strong impact on educational attainment, and which can affect children who would not be considered to be in income poverty.<sup>2</sup>
- 3) **Re-focus the benefits system on children and their families.** At present children are the group of the population most likely to be in poverty: 31% of children are in poverty, compared to 18% of pensioners and 20% of working aged adults.<sup>3</sup> We want to focus the benefits system on the group that need it most.
- 4) **Improve the support given to care leavers.** In recognition of the fact that children leaving care often struggle in the transition to adulthood and do not have the support of parents.

### **The policies we think will benefit children now**

- 1) **Move the Universal Credit (UC) uplift from the adult to the child element – targeting the uplift at those who need it most.** While the UC uplift has undoubtedly benefited some families, 60% of households in receipt of UC do not have children.<sup>4</sup> As the adult element has been uplifted, but not the child element, the uplift has been a bigger proportional benefit to those without children compared to families. This has entrenched an existing bias against children within the benefit system.<sup>5</sup> Switching the uplift to the child element of UC would protect families at the end of the uplift period, for substantially less than the cost of

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<sup>1</sup> Educational disadvantage: how does England compare?, *Education Policy Institute*, 19 April 2018, [link](#).

<sup>2</sup> The National Food Strategy, *Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs*, 29 July 2020, pg.53, [link](#).

<sup>3</sup> Poverty in the UK: statistics, *House of Commons Briefing*, 31 March 2021, [link](#).

<sup>4</sup> Universal Credit Statistics, *Department for Work and Pensions*, 29 April 2013 to 8 April 2021, [link](#).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

maintaining the uplift to the adult element. Moreover, it would rebalance the UC system in favour of families.

- 2) **Increase the number of schools offering breakfast clubs – making sure no child goes hungry and supporting the whole family.** There is very clear evidence that children arriving at school hungry fail to learn.<sup>6</sup> Breakfast clubs are a cheap way of extending the school day and tackling hunger.<sup>7</sup> They have also been proven to improve attendance and behaviour within schools.<sup>8</sup> And, they indirectly improve attainment by helping children arrive in lessons settled and prepared to learn. Most schools already offer breakfast clubs, but they are under-utilised and the costs of establishing, and staffing breakfast clubs are listed by schools as the biggest barriers to providing breakfast clubs.<sup>9</sup>

The Government are currently spending £24 million supporting breakfast clubs in 2,450 schools between 2021-2023.<sup>10</sup> Providing 100% of the funding in the first year, followed by 75% funding in the second year (all breakfast clubs are free for parents). The CCO strongly supports this scheme but would like to see this scheme committed to beyond 2023 and expanded to all state schools in England as part of the recovery from the pandemic. Once this is established, funding could be scaled down to FSM pupils, with other parents contributing. Universal funding would help to establish a network of breakfast clubs across the country and develop the habit of children attending.

If funding was not available to cover all schools, we would like funding expanding from 2,450 schools (about 10% of all schools) to cover the 25.8% of schools which have more than 25% of their pupils eligible for free school meals.

- 3) **Continue the Holiday Activities Fun – so the most disadvantaged children can access social and cultural enrichment during their holidays.** As with breakfast clubs, holiday activity programmes provide cultural and social enrichment, informal education, cheap childcare and food. In other words, they alleviate both cultural and economic poverty, and relieve pressure on families. Children who attend summer schools make up to 2-months additional progress (compared to pupils at the same schools who do not attend).<sup>11</sup>

Already £220 million of funding in 2021 has been committed to the ‘Holiday Activities and Food Programme’ (HAF). This funding makes places available for children eligible free school meals for at least four hours a day, four days a week, 6 weeks a year.

Establishing this programme at short notice, during a pandemic, was a significant logistical achievement. The Children’s Commissioner wants to see funding for the programme committed for another 3-years so the first-year success can be built on in two ways:

- a. Increased participation, particularly for vulnerable children and those with a history of poor school attendance. We recommend the Government looks at additional financial incentives for securing the participation of children with a history of poor school attendance to fund targeted outreach measures aimed at these children.
- b. A wider range of cultural and educational activities delivered through the programme to improve educational attainment for the children who attend. This could include many of the things young people told us, through the Big Ask, they wanted to be able to do in school.

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<sup>6</sup> Holiday Activities Food and Literature Review, *Department for Education*, December 2020, [link](#).

<sup>7</sup> Thousands more school children receiving a nutritious breakfast, *Department for Education*, 2 November 2018, [link](#).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> An Audit of School Breakfast Club Provision in the UK, *Kelloggs*, April 2014 [link](#).

<sup>10</sup> Breakfast clubs programme 2021-2023, *Department for Education*, 9 July 2021, [link](#).

<sup>11</sup> Summer schools guidance, *Department for Education*, 30 June 2021, [link](#).

We recommend that to achieve these ends that more schools are recruited as HAF providers so that they can utilise their existing relationships with children and parents for recruitment, and benefit from synergies between HAF, out-of-school activities and the educational offer.

- 4) **Maintain local discretionary funding streams for families – so they can access the support they need in their local areas.** During Covid additional funding was given to local authorities to help families struggling with food and other essentials through additional funds for local authorities and then the Covid Local Support Grant.<sup>12</sup> The CCO received positive feedback from those working with families about how the money was helping. In theory, this funding should enable short-term interventions with families who are struggling, to help them stabilise and avoid/break debt-traps. We would like to see this funding maintained for the Spending Review period and evaluated to see whether it should become a long-term part of the family support system. We would like to see the current funding level maintained for the next 12-months as furlough is wound down, and with the rest of more financial shocks over the winter. We would then hope funding could be provided at a lower-level. We would strongly encourage maintaining the presumption that 80% of this funding should support families with children.
- 5) **Facilitate auto-enrolment of free school meals – to make sure it captures the most vulnerable children.** This would require basic changes to the UC application form, so that local authorities (LAs) could determine free school meal eligibility alongside council tax relief. LAs already have the information, they just need permission to process it and an agreement with academies to do this on their behalf. The numbers that miss out on FSM are low (estimated to be about 10%), but these are often the most vulnerable children who miss out on free school meals and additional support in school through the pupil premium.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, because infant school meals are free, parents often do not apply until children enter KS2, meaning the school misses out on pupil premium for the infant years.
- 6) **Maintaining the FSM eligibility of families without recourse to public funds – to make sure we are looking after the most vulnerable children.** During the pandemic free school meal eligibility was extended to families with no recourse to public funds who were below the income threshold whereby they would become eligible for free school meals. This would benefit these children (some of the most vulnerable in England), and the schools who support them.
- 7) **Improve the support given to care leavers through Universal Credit.** Details are proposed in our policy paper on children in care and care leavers.
- 8) **Look at the cost of living – so we come up with long-term solutions to support families and children.** By looking holistically at access to work and benefits, money management for families and reducing the cost of living we can tackle the root causes of child poverty.

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<sup>12</sup> £63 million for local authorities to assist those struggling to afford food and other essentials, *Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Department for Work and Pensions*, 11 June 2020, [link](#). COVID Local Support Grant: guidance for local councils, *Department for Work and Pensions*, 21 May 2021, [link](#).

<sup>13</sup> This is an approximate figure we received from local authorities who previously did the matching based on housing benefit covid data before the switch to UC.