

Ten policies to take one million children out of poverty by 2010

Raise incomes for families in and out of work

- 1 Raise child benefit and pay an equal rate to all children, whether first born or not.
- 2 Extend child benefit to pregnant women.
- 3 Link the child element in tax credits and benefits to average incomes or prices, whichever is rising more quickly.

Increase employment for those able and wanting to work

- 4 Take action, including extending the ten year childcare strategy, to help groups facing multiple barriers to work, including minority ethnic groups, disabled parents and parents of disabled children.

Make work pay

- 5 Ensure the National Minimum Wage provides a living wage.

Increase support for the most vulnerable children

- 6 Reform the Social Fund and provide grants for essential items and at times of key transition.
- 7 Ensure that all children, regardless of immigration status, qualify for benefits and inclusion in mainstream services.

Improve public services for poor children

- 8 Reform education funding formulae at local and national level to give greater weighting to poor children.
- 9 Ensure that poverty stops at the school gate by introducing School Uniform Grants and School Activity Funds.
- 10 'Poverty proof' all policies across all government departments.

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One million more

When Labour came to power in 1997, over a third of UK children lived in poverty¹. The rate of child poverty had more than doubled over the previous two decades, and was among the highest in the industrialised world: a child poverty ranking for 1995/6 placed the UK third bottom of 17 countries, ahead only of Italy and the US.

Child poverty has far reaching consequences. Research shows that children growing up poor not only suffer as children, but are also less likely to be successful in education and, as adults, in the labour market. Poverty in childhood is scarring, with poor children at increased risk of low income, benefit dependency and homelessness as adults.

The Labour government has taken this problem seriously. In March 1999, Tony Blair made an unexpected and astounding pledge, not just to reduce but to eradicate child poverty within a generation. This was no idle rhetoric; the Treasury and the Department of Work and Pensions were instructed to take steps to reduce the share of children living in poverty by one quarter by 2004/5, as the first step on the way to eradication by 2020. Changes in taxes and benefits, the introduction of the National Minimum Wage and moves to help parents into work have all contributed to this goal, and the government is on track to meet its first target.

By 2002/3 (the latest year for which data are available), the rate of child poverty had fallen from 34 per cent to 28 per cent, a drop of roughly 700,000 children, with a further 550,000 children expected to move across the poverty line between

2002/3 and 2004/5, thanks largely to further increases in the generosity of tax credits². This is no mean achievement, and the government deserves enormous credit. However, there remains much to do if we are to reach the final goal to completely eliminate child poverty in the UK.

This charter is concerned with the second stage of eradicating child poverty – removing another million children from poverty by 2010. The task gets more difficult as it goes on as attention is turned to groups who are more deprived and harder to reach. The policy effort and the resources required are going to be considerable. And while policies to raise incomes for families today are the most immediate way to affect children's living standards, looking ahead to 2020 public services are also key to transforming their life chances.

This charter offers ten proposals to take a further one million children out of poverty by 2010, to help achieve the Government's vision and to move the UK forward on the path to becoming a society in which no child grows up poor.

¹ Measured after housing costs (AHC), 34 per cent of children lived in households with income below 60 per cent of the equivalised median in 1996/7. Before housing costs (BHC) the figure was 25 per cent.

² These figures are for an after housing costs measure. Before housing costs, the proportionate fall has been similar: poverty fell from 25 per cent to 21 per cent, a drop of 600,000 children, with 450,000 children expected to follow by 2004/5.

1. Raise child benefit and pay an equal rate to all children, whether first born or not.

At root it is quite clear that what poor households need to bring them across the poverty line is more money. One way to achieve this is to help parents into work. But in some cases this is not possible, or even desirable, and while levels of income support for jobless families remain below the poverty line there will always be child poverty.

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So, how is it possible to increase support for jobless families without damaging incentives to work? Labour's response has been the Child Tax Credit (CTC), which has merged the systems of support both for families in work, and jobless families.

The CTC is acknowledged to have played a key role in reducing child poverty. While it has not raised the incomes of those on income support far enough to bring these families even close to the poverty line, it has helped many families who receive the tax credit on top of incomes from work. In 2003, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimated that the CTC would need to rise by £3.00 per week to ensure that the government met the 2004/5 target. The 2004 budget contained an increase of £3.50 per week.

However, the CTC has limitations.

- First, all means-tested benefits carry with them the problem of high marginal effective tax rates as the benefit is withdrawn.
- Second, means-tested benefits have lower take-up than universal benefits. Whether due to lack of information or reluctance to claim, calculations showed that two fifths of poor children were living in families that did not receive means-tested benefits.¹
- Third, the amount a family qualifies for in one financial year depends on their income in the previous year. A rise in income one year means less tax credit in the next and possibly paying back some of the credit. A family which sees its income from work fall must wait until the following year for an increase in tax credit.

Research shows that families are most vulnerable to severe poverty at points of transition – both into and out of work and into and out of lone parent family situations.² A more stable rate of support which requires no additional form filling and bureaucracy at transition stages would help reduce this risk. A real increase in universal child benefit would ensure that the money reached the poorest families and complement the child tax credit while raising no problems for work incentives.

Child benefit for first-born children was increased by 20 per cent in real terms in 1999, when Gordon Brown argued that: "Child benefit remains the fairest and most efficient and cost-effective way of recognising the extra costs and responsibilities borne by all parents".³ But since then, child benefit has not increased in real terms, although from April 2005 it will rise to £17.00 for the first child. End Child Poverty proposes an increase in child benefit to £20 per child per week, to restore the value of the benefit to 4.7 per cent of average (median) full-time earnings in 2004.

A lower rate of child benefit is paid for second and subsequent children. The rate for second children is one-third lower than for first children, yet research has found that family spending on second and subsequent children is just 10 per cent lower than for eldest children.⁴ Furthermore, it is on the birth of a second child that a mother is more likely to leave the labour market as childcare is far more expensive and complicated to organise for two children than for one. Certainly poverty rates are higher in families with more children – 48 per cent of children from families of four or more children are poor, compared to 25 per cent of only children. End Child Poverty proposes that rates of child benefit should be the same for all children.

1 Brewer, M, Clark, T and Goodman, A (2002) 'The Government's child poverty target: How much progress has been made?' Institute for Fiscal Studies, Commentary 88.

2 Adelman, L, Middleton, S and Ashworth, K (2003) Britain's Poorest Children, Save the Children

3 Greener and Cracknell (1998) Child Benefit. House of Commons Research Paper 98/79

4 Middleton, S, Ashworth, K and Braithwaite, I (1997) Small Fortunes: Spending on children, childhood poverty and parental sacrifice, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

2. Extend child benefit to pregnant women.

Government attempts to reduce low birth weight among children born into low income families have not been successful.

failed to meet their Public Service Agreement (PSA) target of reducing low birth weight by 5 per cent.

The social class gap in low birth weight widened across the country between 1997 and 2001¹, while the Sure Start local programmes also

Along with smoking, nutrition during pregnancy is one of the major factors affecting birth weight, which in turn affects health and cognitive ability in later life.

At present, financial support for low-income mothers starts up only once a child is born, with the Sure Start Maternity Grant and the first child benefit payment. But this is already too late to give that child the best chance of starting out well. In particular, with income support rates for childless adults now eroded to just one-third of the poverty line, women who become pregnant whilst on income support have little chance of securing a healthy diet during pregnancy: a 20 year old pregnant woman on income support currently lives off just £44.05 a week.²

Extending the payment of child benefit to pregnant women would help families with the costs of a new child and help ensure that pregnant women on low incomes could afford a nutritious diet. This would require new legislation, as child benefit is paid to the child not the mother, and could not be paid to an unborn child; in effect a new pregnancy benefit equal to the rate of child benefit would need to be introduced. The new benefit could become payable on confirmation by a midwife of a pregnancy (the MATB1 cards currently used to provide formal notification of a pregnancy to employers could be extended for this purpose).

Paying child benefit in pregnancy is not a perfect solution: at best, the new benefit payments would begin 8 to 12 weeks into a pregnancy, and there is evidence that health prior to pregnancy and in the first few weeks is key to a child's development.³ At root, paying very low rates of income support to childless adults may not be a wise long-term strategy, even if the government is concerned about poverty only where it affects children. However, child benefit payments should go some way towards redressing the current imbalance in support for pregnant women, and give unborn children a better chance of a healthy start.

¹ Palmer,G, North, J, Carr, J and Kenway,P (2003) Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

² Bradshaw, J (2004) Understanding and overcoming poverty. Keynote address given at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Centenary Conference, University of York, 13 December 2004.

³ e.g. Wynn and Wynn, 1979, cited in Bradshaw, 2004

3. Link the child element in tax credits and benefits to average incomes or prices, whichever is rising more quickly.

Poverty in the UK, as in the rest of Europe, is relative; what a child needs to participate in a society depends on the living standards of others. The government uses a relative poverty measure which makes the task of ending child poverty a tough one as it is chasing a moving target.

Trying to pull the poorest up over a moving line while the richest soar away is like running up a down escalator – the government must focus on finding additional resources and means of redistributing further in favour of poor families, while progress made so far is in danger of slipping away as average incomes rise.

Linking existing tax credits and benefits to average incomes would ensure that this did not happen, and that the real value of current benefits was maintained, not just in relation to prices but also to rising living standards. Including a provision that links benefits to prices if inflation exceeds the rise in nominal incomes protects the real incomes of the poorest during periods of stagnation in average income. Currently, the child element of child tax credit is the only part of the benefit system which is explicitly income-linked, and this is only for the lifetime of this Parliament. Other parts of the system are not formally linked to prices.

All child-contingent benefits and tax credits should be automatically indexed to average incomes or to prices, whichever is rising more quickly, and indexation must be integrated into the system as a permanent feature.

4. Take action, including extending the ten year childcare strategy, to help groups facing multiple barriers to work, including minority ethnic groups, disabled parents and parents of disabled children.

The Labour government views work as the main route out of poverty. A range of policies have targeted groups facing barriers to work and household unemployment has begun to fall. This is largely due to the National Childcare

Strategy, launched in 1998, which got off to a slow start, but has seen the availability and affordability of childcare places increase.

However, there are groups of families who remain largely untouched by policies to promote employment, and for whom the government needs to take specific action:

• **Minority ethnic families**

Not all ethnic groups have shared equally in the fall in the child poverty rate. While the rate of poverty for white children (measured After Housing Costs (AHC)) fell from 28 per cent in 2000/1 to 26 per cent in 2002/3, child poverty among Pakistani/Bangladeshi families has remained high and has not fallen – 75 per cent in 2002/3 – while poverty among black children is also high and steady at 46 per cent.¹

Low employment rates are one factor behind the high rate of child poverty in some minority ethnic groups. Other contributing factors include larger families, higher concentration in low-paid work and difficulty claiming means-tested benefits due to language barriers. A number of the other policies in the charter will also have an impact on very high rates of poverty among these groups. But both unemployment and low labour market participation are clearly very important too, and raise wider concerns about inclusion if families are outside the labour market not through choice. The ten year childcare strategy launched with the 2004 Pre-Budget Report² highlights the importance of providing childcare to meet the needs of minority ethnic families, and puts forward practical suggestions based on pilot projects which investigated barriers faced by minority ethnic communities in accessing early years services.

• **Disabled parents**

Disabled parents form a significant group, currently numbering 2.1 million, half of whom are jobless. In 2002/3 39 per cent of children living with at least one disabled adult were estimated to live in poverty and in reality, the figure is certain to be higher. A number of policies have been introduced to help disabled people enter work but the specific difficulties faced by disabled parents have not been addressed.

In (2004) the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee argued that disabled parents require increased support to help them into work, because of the extra demands of parenthood on their health and energy levels, and the additional difficulties involved in accessing childcare (such as transport issues). The Committee called for the immediate national extension of the Return to Work credit (a pilot paying £40 a week for a year to those moving into work from incapacity benefit) and free registered childcare for disabled parents as they look for work. This charter supports these proposals.

• **Parents of a disabled child**

In 2002, just 3 per cent of mothers of disabled children worked full-time and 13 per cent part-time, compared to 22 per cent and 39 per cent of mothers of non-disabled children.³ Three surveys of parents with a disabled child have found that many parents would like to work but cannot, because of the availability and cost of suitable childcare.⁴

The ten year childcare strategy 2004 places a duty on local authorities to ensure that local childcare needs are met, and adds that in meeting this duty local authorities "must also fully reflect the circumstances of families with disabled children". But it is not clear how local authorities are to do this. The Government currently provides £25 million a year to local authorities to help meet the additional costs of childcare for disabled children, which is clearly insufficient and the strategy gives no details about how provision for disabled children is to improve.

This charter proposes that a separate national childcare strategy for disabled children should supplement the ten year strategy, putting forward concrete proposals to improve the availability and affordability of suitable childcare.

¹ Unfortunately, small sample sizes mean that the HBAI does not distinguish statistics for Pakistani families from those for Bangladeshi families, hence the need to discuss them together.

² HM Treasury, DfES, DWP, DTI (2004) Choice for parents, the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare, December 2004.

³ End Child povertyC [End Child Poverty Campaign] (2003) 'Disabled children, their families and child poverty', Briefing Paper, End Child Poverty Campaign and Council for Disabled Children.

⁴ *ibid.*

5. Ensure the National Minimum Wage provides a living wage.

A job is not in itself enough to protect a family from poverty. In 2002/3, 49 per cent of children in poverty lived in a household where at least one adult was in work¹.

The introduction of the first ever National Minimum Wage (NMW) in 1999 was a major achievement for the Labour government. But it was introduced at a low level (£3.60

per hour for workers aged over 21) and the present hourly rate of £4.85 remains below the level required to allow even a full-time worker with no dependants to rise above the poverty line.

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What would a living wage look like? Recent research² argued for a threshold somewhere between £6.00 and £7.00 an hour - between the level required by a couple with one child and a couple with two children to escape relative income poverty without the help of means-tested benefits.

If 60 per cent of median income is accepted as the poverty line why not aim for a minimum wage which is 60 per cent of the median full-time wage? Other countries with low poverty rates have NMWs at just about this level, among them France, Belgium, Germany, Denmark and Sweden. In the UK, 60 per cent of the gross median hourly earnings would have meant £6.00 an hour in April 2003 and £6.30 in April 2004.³

Tax credits are in place to plug the gap and ensure (in principle) that work is a route out of poverty. Working tax credits have now been extended to childless couples too, making it clear that the role of these credits is not just to support extra dependants: it is officially accepted that many jobs will not provide a sufficient return to support even an individual. However, while tax credits have been very effective, they do not make sense as a long-term solution to in-work poverty. In effect, they are a subsidy from government to the employers of low paid workers, making it possible for these employers to continue paying below subsistence wages.

But if government did not provide the subsidy and wages were increased, would the jobs simply disappear, relocating overseas to countries where lower wages are possible? So far employers predictions of job losses have been unfounded: indeed, the number of jobs in the low paying sector has increased by 4.9 per cent (260,000 workers) since the NMW was introduced.

Very little low paid employment is in sectors which are exposed to international competition. Retail, hospitality, hairdressing, cleaning, security and care work cannot easily be outsourced abroad. The public sector is currently directly responsible for some 25 per cent of low-paid jobs, with indirect responsibility for more (through outsourced cleaning contracts, for example). If public sector jobs were themselves better paid, it would make a big difference, and it would raise standards for the private sector, which is competing for the same workers.

Sixty per cent of median full-time hourly pay should be kept in mind as a goal for the minimum wage. To move towards this goal, the NMW should be raised by 10 per cent a year, starting with an increase of 50 pence to £5.35 in October 2005, as recommended by the TUC.⁴ Assuming an increase in the median hourly wage of around 5 per cent a year, this would bring the NMW to 60 per cent of median full-time pay within seven years. (In both 2003 and 2004 the minimum was raised by 7 per cent, the largest rises since it was introduced)⁵.

1 DWP (2004) Households Below Average Income 1994/5-2002/3
2 Howarth and Kenway (2004) 'Why worry any more about the low paid?'. New Policy Institute.

3 National Statistics (2004) 2004 First Release: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, October 2004

4 TUC (2004) 'TUC calls for increase to National Minimum Wage', press release 10 November 2004.
5 *ibid*.

6. Reform the Social Fund and provide grants for essential items and at times of key transition.

The policies proposed in this charter aim to bring the next million children out of poverty, though it is important that in focusing on halving child poverty we do not forget the situation of those who are still at the very bottom of the income distribution, living in the most difficult circumstances. The pledge to abolish child poverty becomes a double-edged sword if it means the most vulnerable are overlooked in

the focus on the easiest to reach. The policies in this section are aimed at some of the most vulnerable children. The aim of the Social Fund is to help poor families with lumpy one-off costs. It was introduced by the Conservative Government in 1988 (replacing the single payments system) and has remained largely unchanged since.

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Under the old single payments system, grants played a more important role; indeed one of the reasons for the Social Fund's introduction was that loans would cut costs.

The Social Fund is widely acknowledged to have extensive problems: First, the fund is limited in size, which means that even families who meet the established criteria can be refused a loan. Because budgets are allocated annually to benefit offices families with identical circumstances can receive different answers depending on when and where they apply. Second the repayment of loans can cause real problems. Levels of income support are already far from sufficient to reach the poverty line. Families lucky enough to receive a loan from the Social Fund then face deductions. In November 2003, 46 per cent of lone parent families on Income Support were facing weekly deductions of an average £11 each, or 10 per cent of the average payment.¹

It is important to remember that Social Fund loans are made, not for luxuries, but for basic necessities such as beds and bedding, clothes and shoes, cookers and washing machines, and for 'things to help you look for or start work'. The government has announced plans to make the Social Fund fairer with changes in the way in which decisions are made about loans, and the introduction of a lower repayment rate. While these reforms have been welcomed, they do not change the fact that some of the country's most vulnerable families are forced into debt to pay for items widely considered to be necessities. The charter proposes that the Social Fund is reformed to include a much greater role for grants. **Four new types of grant should be made available, loans should continue to be available for items which are not covered by these categories.**

• Health and Safety Grants

A system of grants for items considered essential for a child's health and safety, including a cooker and fridge, heating equipment, beds and bedding, and a washing machine. Needs for these items might arise through changes in family circumstances (a birth or the onset of disability), rehousing due to relationship breakdown, the loss of items due to fire or theft, or to ordinary wear and

tear. The system should explicitly take into account the additional needs of families with disabled children. Grants should be made available to all in receipt of the top rate of child tax credit, perhaps upon the confirmation of need (for example by a health visitor), but without external limitations on the budget.²

• Opportunity Grants

Opportunity Grants would be one-off payments to families to help cover the cost of the transition from benefits into work. Evidence suggests that children are most vulnerable to severe poverty at periods of transition, and that these include the transition of being a jobless household to a household with a member in paid work.³ This may be because of the upfront costs of clothes, childcare and travel before any wages or childcare tax credit are received. Opportunity Grants should be made as statutory payments to families moving into work from income support or jobseeker's allowance.

• Two-yearly Lump Sum Grants for families living long-term on out-of-work benefits

Families surviving on out-of-work benefits struggle to get by week to week, and it is impossible for them to save for an emergency, a family holiday or other large items of expenditure. All families should be able, at least occasionally, to take their children on holiday or give them a special birthday present - without ending up in debt. This charter proposes that Lump Sum Grants are made to families living on benefits long-term: the grants would be made after two years on benefits, and every two years thereafter, and families would be able to spend or save them as they chose.

• Supplements for extra meals during the school holidays

Where free school meals are provided in a sensitive way, there is evidence that they make a substantial positive difference to poor families.⁴ However, in the school holidays parents must find the money for all meals themselves. Recent research for Barnardo's points to severe hardship for many poor families as a result.⁵ This paper proposes that families in receipt of free school meals are given a benefit supplement during the school holidays, equivalent to the daily cost of those meals.

1 Inland Revenue (2003) Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry November 2003

2 These grants were initially proposed by One Parent Families, the Child Poverty Action Group and the Family Welfare Association in Howard, M (2003) 'Lump Sums: Roles for the Social Fund in Eradicating Child Poverty', London.

3 Adelman, L, Middleton, S and Ashworth, K (2003) Britain's Poorest Children, Save the Children

4 Flaherty, J, J Veit-Wilson and P Dornan (2004) Poverty: the facts. Fifth edition. London: Child Poverty Action Group.

5 Gill, O and N Sharma (2004) Food Poverty in the School Holidays. Barnardo's South West.

7. Ensure that all children, regardless of immigration status, qualify for benefits and for inclusion in mainstream services.

The situation of one particular group of very vulnerable children – the children of asylum seekers – has worsened since 1997.

created, to provide support to cover food, other essential items, and accommodation through dispersal around the country

The 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act removed mainstream benefit entitlement from all asylum seekers. Instead, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) was

Further legislation in 2002 and 2004 has led to further stringent measures including removing support for families at the end of the asylum process. It has also led to controversial policies like Section 55, which allowed the Home Office to withdraw access to NASS from those who do not apply for asylum 'as soon as reasonably practicable'. (Section 55 has recently been overturned by the Court of Appeal which ruled that the Home Office was in breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights.) The parallel framework created to support asylum seekers and their families and other aspects of support policy have been repeatedly criticised for failing to guarantee adequate support.

The Government's argument for its stringent policies is that it is necessary to deter 'abuse of the asylum system'. But research suggests that neither the availability and generosity of welfare benefits nor the toughness of requirements of the application process are important influences on asylum seekers' choice of destination; most have no knowledge of what their entitlements will be.¹ Research commissioned by the Home Office itself concluded that the withdrawal of benefits in the 1990s had had little impact on the numbers of asylum seekers choosing the UK as their destination.²

The work the Government has done to improve the living standards of hundreds of thousands of poor children is marred by the treatment of the most vulnerable. This charter proposes that government commit itself to extending child-contingent benefits to all children in the UK, regardless of their immigration status, and to including all children in mainstream services.

¹ IAP (Inter-Agency Partnership) (2004) The impact of Section 55 on the Inter-Agency Partnership and the asylum seekers it supports. London: Refugee Council.

² Zetter, R, D Griffiths, S Ferretti and M Pearl (2003) An assessment of the impact of asylum policies, 1990-2000. Home Office Research Study No 259. London: Home Office.

8. Reform education funding formulae at local and national level to give greater weighting to poor children.

This government sees education as a key element of the long term strategy to eliminate child poverty. It also acknowledges that the costs of educating children from disadvantaged backgrounds are considerably higher than the costs of ensuring similar outcomes for more privileged children. The national education funding formulae which determine the allocation of funding for education to local

authorities are in principle weighted to take account of these different costs, and they have become more generous during Labour's period in office. While in 1997/8 spending per pupil in the 10 per cent most deprived authorities was 16 per cent higher than in the 10 per cent least deprived authorities, by 2002/3 the differential had risen to 24 per cent.¹

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But the spending bias towards poorer children is still far from sufficient to make up for the additional costs associated with disadvantage. Indeed, in changing the allocation, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) made an explicit decision not to compensate local authorities for the full amount of extra costs. Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) in a survey commissioned by the DfES calculated the additional support that schools felt that disadvantaged pupils needed and were unable to provide within their resources as £500 per pupil. The DfES decided to meet half this extra cost, as ‘a compromise between the opposing views of the most deprived authorities... and the least deprived’.²

The DfES also had a second reason for not meeting the full extra costs associated with poorer children. As local authorities have their own formulae to determine internal allocation between schools, there is no way to guarantee that the extra money will reach the schools for which it is intended. Thus not only is the national formula explicitly inadequate to cover extra costs, but its impact is also diluted by the time it reaches school level. There is evidence that distributions at local level generally give lower weight to social need than does the national distribution, but with considerable variation across authorities.³

The Treasury's Child Poverty Review in 2004 promised that “a review of the way in which these formulae operate will commence this year”, to assess “whether schools in deprived areas are treated equitably.”⁴ But there has not yet been any sign of this review.

This charter proposes that education funding formulae at local level are reformed to ensure that the extra resources made available by central government to cover the extra costs of educating deprived children are passed on in full to the schools that need them most. Following this reform, it proposes that the DfES changes the national funding formulae to include the full additional cost of educating disadvantaged children, irrespective of the views of the least deprived authorities.

1 Sefton, T (2004) A Fair Share of Welfare, CASE report 25, May 2004
2 DfES (2002) ‘Technical note on the new education funding system’, available from the DfES website (<http://www.dfes.gov.uk>)

3 Sefton, 2004

4 HM Treasury (2004) Child Poverty Review

9. Ensure poverty stops at the school gate by introducing School Uniform Grants and School Activity Funds.

It is often assumed that, inside the school gate, children's opportunities and experiences are equal, whatever their family circumstances. However, research with poor children and their parents challenges that view, showing that school can in reality be exclusionary and divisive.¹ Two issues in particular stand out as creating difficulties for low-income children. The first is clothes: children feel

considerable pressure to wear the 'right' clothes, and while school uniform can help, the correct uniform is often expensive. The second is extra-curricular activities and school trips, which can be important social as well as educational occasions for a peer group, but which usually carry a charge.

School uniform

School uniform can provide protection from pressure to wear fashionable or designer clothes to school, but wearing anything less than the full official uniform can carry a stigma and lead to bullying, or even to trouble with the school authorities: a Citizens Advice report found that a significant minority of children had been sent home from school or withdrawn from the classroom because their parents had not been able to afford the correct uniform.²

Traditionally, Local Education Authority (LEA) school clothing grants have been available to families in this situation, and many authorities still provide them. But research in 2004 found that 42 per cent of LEAs provided no help at all, and only 24 per cent provided help to children of both primary and secondary age.³

The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee concluded that, 'school clothing grants are essential for low-income families,' that the national strategy on child poverty should ' earmark new resources to provide for adequate school clothing for all low-income families' and that government should 'take appropriate action to enable LEAs to provide school clothing grants'.⁴ This charter supports these proposals: it is the responsibility of government to ensure that all children are provided with a school uniform, and that no child is stigmatised or excluded because of their inability to afford this

School trips and extra-curricular activities

A recent study revealed that over half of the children and young people living in low income families were unable to go on school trips with any regularity, and many were afraid of being left behind and excluded.⁵ When children are unable to take part in school outings or extra curricular activities, it affects not just their educational opportunities, but also their ability to bond with their peers. This can have an impact which far exceeds the duration of the activity, as the child who does not go is excluded from the excitement building up to a trip and the shared memories afterwards.

The costs of participating fully in school activities are increasing, including school trips and contributions towards in-school activities, such as cookery and swimming.⁶ Some schools offer help, but this is discretionary and parents may receive it on one occasion but not on the next. Poor communication on the part of the school compounds the problem: not all the families in the study knew that they did not have to pay, or that help was available.

This charter proposes that all schools should have equal opportunities policies, explicitly committing them to ensuring that no child is excluded from an opportunity made available in school time or on school premises because of their inability to pay. Further, schools should be provided with Activity Funds, allocated on the basis of the proportion of children in receipt of free school meals, to ensure that any activities and trips offered are available to all.

1 Ridge, T (2002) Childhood poverty and social exclusion: from a child's perspective. Bristol: The Policy Press

2 Citizens Advice (2004) 'Help with school uniform costs: update'. London: Citizens Advice.

3 *ibid.*

4 Work and Pensions Committee (2004) Child Poverty in the UK, Second Report of Session 2003-4, Volume I.

5 Ridge, T (2002)

6 *ibid.*

10. Poverty proof all policies across all government departments

While eradicating child poverty is a clear government objective, it may be argued that only two government departments – the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions – have it at heart. This can lead to the introduction of other policies which conflict with the overriding goal.

Policy towards asylum seekers is one example. In other departments, policies may be introduced which do not openly conflict with the child poverty objective, but which do not go as far as they could to assist in meeting that objective: the decision to compromise over the allocation of education funding as discussed in another section of the charter perhaps an illustration.

In contrast, the Irish government 'poverty-proofs' all policy initiatives, ensuring that reducing poverty is included as a mainstream objective across all parts of government. This charter proposes that the government follows the Irish example and introduces the poverty proofing of all policies. All departments need to be involved in the anti-poverty strategy if there is to be a real chance of eliminating child poverty by 2020.

