

GMCVO

Voice

# Measuring Child Poverty: a consultation on better measures of child poverty

Response from Greater Manchester Centre  
for Voluntary Organisation

February 2013



Greater Manchester Centre  
for Voluntary Organisation

# Overview

**Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO) welcomes the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the causes and effects of poverty and what can be done to support the most vulnerable in our society. We are pleased to see the government looking at the issue of child poverty and the recognition that it has a range of causes and effects. However, we feel the proposed multi-dimensional poverty measures do not provide a more robust or effective way of measuring child poverty.**

Most of the dimensions – to greater or lesser extent – are connected to child poverty, but not exclusively. So whilst some families that might be considered unstable may experience poverty, not all such families will. Even where there is a greater tendency for such an issue to be associated with poverty, government needs to present robust evidence as to whether such an issue is a cause or a symptom in order to drive policy.

So, for example, if parental health is a cause of poverty then clearly this may help to direct policy with the aim of reducing poverty. If parental health is an effect of poverty then its use will be in understanding where interventions may be directed and in understanding where poverty occurs. The method of measuring parental health will need to take account of how the indicator will impact on delivery.

This applies to other indicators – issues that are coincident with poverty do not make robust indicators by themselves, unless there is a clear understanding of the relationship and an effective way of measuring this. For each indicator we would wish to see the government's case robustly stated for how the issue is either a cause or an effect and detail of proposed measurement.

It is believed by many organisations (including GMCVO members) that the four measures detailed in the Poverty Act 2010, which was developed in partnership with many stakeholders and experts including children's charities, provide a solid framework for measuring child poverty and that, contrary to the assumption of the consultation document, a "better" measure is not currently needed.

However an exercise in developing techniques to understand the risk factors, causes and effects of poverty, and to track the proposed and additional dimensions over time could provide a helpful means of ensuring that initiatives take account of wider environmental factors in their delivery.

In order to support changes to the way child poverty is measured we would need to have an understanding of the costs of implementing a new multi-dimensional measure and have evidence to suggest this spend would provide sufficient benefit compared to work to prevent and/or alleviate child poverty. Key here, to justify change, is a need to understand how these indicators will be used practically to change and improve delivery.

# Poverty in Greater Manchester

The Greater Manchester Poverty Commission (for which GMCVO provides a secretariat function) published its findings on 15th January 2013. The full report and recommendations can be viewed here [www.povertymanchester.org](http://www.povertymanchester.org). The Commission sought testimonies from those experiencing poverty and has made a series of recommendations based on the evidence gathered. Over 100 local voluntary groups also made submissions to the Commission based on the testimony of their users.

## Proposed dimensions

### 1. Income and material deprivation

As stated in the consultation document, a lack of income does not tell us everything about child poverty but it is essential when it comes to poverty measurement. We think therefore that the relative poverty measure should continue to remain the key indicator in measuring child poverty alongside the other measures identified in the Child Poverty Act 2010.

### 2. Worklessness

Worklessness is closely linked with some instances of child poverty; however, we are concerned that the consultation does not recognise the importance and prominence of in-work poverty, an issue explored in some detail in the Greater Manchester Poverty Commission report. Evidence shows – see [policy exchange report here](#) – that the majority of those families seeing in-work poverty undertake less than 40hrs work each week. Due to economic change, increasing prevalence of part-time or limited hours working may be contributing to poverty and there is a need to understand better this impact.

### 3. Unmanageable debt

Measuring debt is problematic – as ‘unmanageable’ is a subjective term and illegal lending, arguably the most damaging contributor towards unmanageable debt, is very difficult to measure.

### 4. Poor housing

Poor housing is closely linked with child poverty and in terms of understanding the experience of living in poverty is potentially very useful.

### 5. Parental skill level

Although not a direct indicator of child poverty, we know that a lack of skills is related to and poses a higher risk of poverty.

## **6. Access to quality education**

This is not an indicator of child poverty but we know that access to quality education early in life can improve school readiness and attainment.

## **7. Family stability**

The consultation document identifies the traditional family model as 'stable' – we do not believe that stability is necessarily defined by the family model and think that it would be very difficult to arrive at a robust definition of family stability and a mechanism for measuring this.

## **8. Parental health**

Although not in itself an indicator of child poverty, parental health could be a risk factor for child poverty, particularly in instances when a decline in health leads to a reduction or loss of employment income. A decline in parental health may also be the result of poverty – for example, debt is a major risk factor that contributes to mental ill-health. Many frontline voluntary organisations have reported an increase in the number of service users struggling to cope with day-to-day life owing to experiencing poverty.

# **Additional factors associated with poverty**

As mentioned previously in this response, the identified dimensions would provide only a partial picture of the many complex factors that can play a role in the lives of children living in poverty. If we are to explore issues identified in the consultation document that affect a minority of children living in poverty (for example, parental drug and alcohol abuse) other issues should also be considered – some of these are listed below.

- In-work poverty
- Whether children are in or have been in care
- Access to quality services (not just education) including childcare and affordability of services
- Child health (including mental health and wellbeing)
- Involvement in the criminal justice system
- Caring responsibilities (distinction from childcare or children with caring responsibilities)
- Social exclusion
- Importance of 'place' and cost of living – understanding how the area where someone lives affects their wellbeing. This can include physical environment, access to services including transport and social elements such as support networks.

Regardless of the steps taken to gain a greater understanding of any of the issues affecting those living in poverty, it is essential that income remains the focus of any measure of child poverty. However, it may be that an analysis of other factors and the extent to which they occur, tracked over time, would be worthwhile in terms of helping us to understand how to prevent or alleviate child poverty.

## Role of the voluntary sector

Greater Manchester's voluntary sector is large (approx 11,000 groups). The majority of these organisations are small, entirely run by volunteers and may be unconstituted. Examples are luncheon clubs, food banks, parent and toddler groups, sports clubs, after-school clubs and peer support meetings. These organisations often exist in deprived areas experiencing high levels of poverty and are crucial in providing support to the most vulnerable people who might not access services elsewhere. Any policy around tackling child poverty should recognise the role played by these groups, alongside the medium and larger sized charities that may be better placed to engage in debate and influence policy. Consideration should be given to carrying out further consultation specifically with these less frequently heard groups, and such groups should be closely involved in piloting and testing any new measures.

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**Greater Manchester Centre for Voluntary Organisation (GMCVO)** is the voluntary sector support organisation covering the Greater Manchester city region. We support local voluntary action by local people, working in partnership with other support organisations and with the public and private sectors. We aspire to be a conduit for information for and about our sector, and to provide co-ordination and leadership. A large element of our work is in representing the views and needs of people involved in local voluntary action, sharing ideas and brokering relationships. We have a membership of almost 500 and reach around 3,000 groups per year.

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