



Office of the Children's Commissioner:

# 'Trying to get by': Consulting with children and young people on child poverty

March 2011



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## Foreword by the Children's Commissioner

*"I thought poverty was in other countries abroad, like the adverts on the telly ... People would say that people on council estates are in poverty but really they're not when you think about it because there are worse people, aren't there?"* (Girl, Birmingham)

We carried out this research because we felt that children and young people's voices were missing from the strategies aimed at eradicating child poverty in this country. We therefore wanted to provide them with an opportunity to tell the Government about their experiences of poverty and deprivation, what this really means to them and how it impacts on their lives.

There have been a number of well-intentioned policies to reduce child poverty in England. These have lifted some children and young people out of poverty, but a significant number continue to be disadvantaged by social and economic circumstances beyond their control.

Earlier this year, we submitted written evidence to the Government's child poverty consultation, *'Tackling child poverty and improving life chances: Consulting on a new approach'*. This report presents a fuller account of the views of the children and young people we consulted about tackling child poverty in England.

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child criticised the UK Government in 2008 for having unacceptable levels of child poverty. Under the Child Poverty Act 2010, the Government has a legal obligation to eradicate child poverty by the year 2020. We felt that the imminent publication of the Child Poverty Strategy was an opportune time for the views of children and young people on this issue to be heard.

I am grateful to the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) for carrying out this significant piece of work. I would also like to thank the children and young people for taking the time to share their views and personal experiences of their everyday lives.

Our report reveals the reluctance of some children and young people to apply the terms 'poor' and 'poverty' to their own circumstances, even when they realise that their families are struggling financially and in need of support. The term poverty tends to be applied only to those in very extreme circumstances, for example, the homeless and those experiencing famine in other countries.

There is greater familiarity with, and use of, terms such as 'less well off', 'low income', 'low-paid' or 'struggling'.

We carried out in-depth discussions with 73 children and young people living in some of the most deprived areas in the country about the impact of living on a low income. The views they presented were not all negative. But most of the discussions centred around the adverse impact this can have on their education, employment, social mobility and aspirations, as well as more obvious disadvantages like not being able to afford the same possessions or have the same opportunities as their peers. This includes mobile phones, personal computers, branded clothing and money to pay for social activities, school trips or holidays.

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Young people are worried about being trapped in a cycle of poverty. They are concerned about the current economic climate and the impact it might have on their own financial situation and that of their families. They spoke about 'new' groups of people becoming poor as a result of redundancies and cost of living rises. They also feel the gap is widening between rich and poor.

The negative impact of changes to certain entitlements, like the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and the increased tuition fees are also a concern to them. The cost of transport fares can make it difficult for them to get to school, college and work.

To them the impact of poverty goes beyond material possessions. There is also a stigma associated with being poor. They told us they are reluctant and embarrassed to tell others about their circumstances and even unwilling to accept support when it is offered – even from their own friends.

Intimidation, bullying and being tormented are often associated with the way someone looks. They describe how social aggression, like isolation from friends and cruel gossiping, can affect their well-being. They are also aware of the strain that living in poverty can place on family relationships.

One child said: *“When I was at secondary school, I think that I was able to get free school meals or something, but I didn’t want to have that status, I didn’t want to be the one, ‘oh, her family can’t afford to whatever’. So I told my mum to stop it and I paid for my own meals and obviously it got tougher for my mum.”*

Children and families living in England are experiencing quite challenging economic times with dramatic cuts in public spending. By adding to the evidence base to lift children out of poverty with this report, it is hoped that young people’s voices will have a greater presence in policy discussions and developments to eradicate child poverty in England.



**Dr Maggie Atkinson**  
**Children’s Commissioner for England**

**March 2011**

## About the Office of the Children's Commissioner



The Office of the Children's Commissioner is a national organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Dr Maggie Atkinson. The post of Children's Commissioner for England was established by the Children Act 2004. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underpins and frames all of our work.

The Children's Commissioner has a duty to promote the views and interests of all children in England, in particular those whose voices are least likely to be heard, to the people who make decisions about their lives. She also has a duty to speak on behalf of all children in the UK on non-devolved issues which include immigration, for the whole of the UK, and youth justice, for England and Wales. One of the Children's Commissioner's key functions is encouraging organisations that provide services for children always to operate from the child's perspective.

Under the Children Act 2004 the Children's Commissioner is required both to publish what she finds from talking and listening to children and young people, and to draw national policymakers' and agencies' attention to the particular circumstances of a child or small group of children which should inform both policy and practice.

As the Office of the Children's Commissioner, it is our statutory duty to highlight where we believe vulnerable children are not being treated appropriately and in line with duties established under international and domestic legislation.

## About the authors



Kerry Martin, Research Manager at the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), is co-author and was project leader for this work. Kerry and her colleague Ruth Hart (a researcher at NFER) facilitated the children and young people's discussion groups and completed the analysis and report writing.

Anne Mason, Director of Participation; Ross Hendry, Director of Policy; and Lisa Davis, Senior Policy Officer: Equalities and Rights, from the Office of the Children's Commissioner gave valuable guidance and feedback.

# Executive summary

## The context of the research

The latest figures from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) show that 2.8 million children in the UK (around one in five children) live in 'relative poverty' (DWP, 2010)<sup>1</sup>. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child criticised the UK Government in 2008 for having unacceptable levels of child poverty.<sup>2</sup> Work to end child poverty is seen as a high priority by the Office of the Children's Commissioner and, under the Child Poverty Act 2010, the Government has a legal obligation to eradicate child poverty by the year 2020. Other responsibilities associated with the Act include the production of a revised child poverty strategy on a three-yearly basis. In preparing the child poverty strategy, the Government is required to undertake a wide-ranging consultation process to identify key issues of concern and possible solutions. To help ensure the 2011 strategy takes the perspectives of children and young people with direct experience of poverty into account, the Office of the Children's Commissioner commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to convene the discussion groups reported on here.

## The child poverty consultation

This report is based on consultation events held with children and young people in five locations across England. We chose to locate our consultations (for the most part) in areas of high deprivation. Areas were selected using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). This index ranks local authorities according to the proportion of children under the age of 16 that live in low-income households in an area. We selected four areas from the 10 most deprived authorities in England (as ranked in the IDACI): Liverpool, Newham, Islington and Birmingham. We also chose a contrasting authority, North Yorkshire, which scored relatively low on IDACI,<sup>3</sup> but held the consultation event in the district of Selby, which is a small, semi-rural town with known pockets of deprivation.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a definition of poverty as having a net disposable income (before housing costs) which is equivalent to 60 per cent, or less, of the contemporary median. Department for Work and Pensions (2010). *Statistics: Households Below Average Income (HBAI)*. [online]. See:

<http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai> [accessed 1 February 2011].

<sup>2</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations, 2008.

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC.C.GBR.CO.4.pdf> [accessed 24 March 2011]

<sup>3</sup> In the bottom 20 authorities.

Discussion groups were held between November 2010 and January 2011. A total of 73 young people between the ages of 10 and 20 took part, with an average age of 14-17 years. The participants had a wide range of backgrounds. Many young people revealed that they or their families were in receipt of Free School Meals,<sup>4</sup> Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA),<sup>5</sup> and/or benefits of other sorts. These indicators of low income suggest participants are likely to fit commonly used definitions of poverty. Despite focusing the consultations on areas with a high proportion of low-income households, there was inevitably some variation in young people's personal circumstances. The size and composition of the sample means any generalisation of findings should be made with caution.

In each discussion group, we asked children and young people:

- what life is like for children and young people who do not have a lot of money
- why children and young people are poor, and
- how the Government can make a difference to the lives of these children and young people.

The following summary provides an overview of what they said.

#### **How do children and young people perceive poverty?**

- Children and young people are reluctant to apply the terms 'poor' and 'poverty' to their own circumstances. The term poverty tends to be applied only to those in very extreme circumstances, for example, the homeless and those experiencing famine in other countries.
- There is greater familiarity with, and use of, terms such as 'less well off', 'low income', 'low- paid' or 'struggling'.
- Young people associate stigma with being poor and are reluctant to tell others about their circumstances. They are embarrassed to ask for help and can be unwilling to accept support when it is offered (even by their own friends).
- Although young people believe that those who are poor can be identified by their appearance, they agree that some children and young people living in poverty can be difficult to identify and therefore support.

<sup>4</sup> Currently children whose parents are in receipt of one of the following benefits are entitled to receive Free School Meals: income support; income-based jobseeker's allowance; an income-related employment and support allowance; support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; child tax credit.

<sup>5</sup> EMA eligibility has been based upon the total yearly income of the parent(s) a young person has been living with (including step-parents). In England, the top qualifying level of income was £30,810. EMA is no longer available to new applicants.

- Young people recognise that different types of poverty exist, including absolute poverty and relative poverty. They also describe the concept of emotional poverty where an individual might have financial wealth, yet not have opportunities for positive, loving and encouraging relationships and experiences.
- Young people told us that poverty is mainly linked to income and to difficulties finding employment, but they also make connections between poverty and a lack of motivation (leading to an over-reliance on benefits). Others make connections between poverty and family circumstance, including a history of poverty across generations, family breakdown and family size.
- Young people are concerned about the current economic climate and the impact it might have on their own financial situation and that of their families. They spoke about 'new' groups of people becoming poor (as a result of redundancies and cost of living rises) and feel the gap is widening between rich and poor.
- Young people are worried about becoming trapped in a cycle of poverty due to the current high rates of unemployment, the prevalence of low paid jobs, and income freezes. Similarly, they are concerned about the withdrawal of the EMA and the expected increases in tuition fees, and the impacts of these developments on their opportunities for the future.

### **Impact on material circumstances and social life**

- Being poor and living in poverty means that children and young people can miss out on a range of material things. There is overwhelming agreement among young people about pressure from their peers, and society more widely, to own certain material items such as branded clothing, mobile phones and personal computers (PCs).
- Young people believe that there is an expectation from their teachers and schools that they will have access to a PC and the internet at home. Without such resources, they feel at a considerable disadvantage to their peers.
- Limited access to technology, particularly mobile phones and the internet, also means that young people can feel socially isolated, because they have fewer ways of communicating with their peers outside school.
- Young people are not only identified as being poor by their own possessions, but also by those of their wider family. Judgements are made by their peers, for example, based on the state of the family home and the type of car (if any) their parents drive.



- Young people associate poverty with appearance. They agree that not having fashionable clothes, shoes and accessories means a child will stand out as being different from the wider peer group.
- Developing and maintaining friendships is said to be difficult for those who are poor.
- Young people make strong links between being poor and being bullied. Intimidation and torment are often associated with the way someone looks (particularly their manner of dress). Although young people involved in the consultation did not report cases of physical violence, they told us about the experience of social aggression (including isolation from friendship groups and cruel gossiping) and how it affected their own well-being and that of their peers.
- Financially disadvantaged young people often miss out on experiences because of the cost of activities. Young people describe, for example, how those who are poor become excluded from some social networks and discussions because they are unable to experience the same opportunities.
- A good number of young people involved in the consultations were reliant on public transport and had serious concerns about the cost of fares and the adequacy of services. Along with the difficulties this presented to young people in terms of accessing their places of education and employment, there were knock-on effects for opportunities to engage in social activities and maintain friendships.
- Children and young people also talked about the impact of poverty on the ability to eat well.

### **Impact on families and communities**

- Life as a child in a poor family is seen as distinctive in several respects, not all of which are negative.
- Though many of the young people contributing to the consultation appeared to have a good relationship with their parents, they told us that poverty can put a strain on this relationship, and on the relationship their parents have with each other.
- Poverty is perceived as both a cause and consequence of family breakdown, with some single parent families struggling and considered as disadvantaged by the benefits system.

- Older young people experience difficulties in making the transition to independent living and some feel trapped in the family home. The need to find space and escape can lead to them being exposed to negative influences and more likely to indulge in risky behaviours.
- These risky behaviours include drinking and drug taking, and are closely related with anti-social behaviour and crime. As such, they have impacts on the wider community and lead to both young people and adults feeling unsafe.

### **Impact on education and training**

- Children and young people living in poverty face limitations with regard to school choice. Poor families are often 'priced out' of the catchment areas for better schools and their options are constrained by access to transport. Young people are concerned about the impact of this on their social mobility.
- Poor children's experience of school can often be less positive, due to the type of school they end up going to, and the unhelpful attitudes of teachers, and their peers, to them and their circumstances.
- Schemes such as Free School Meals, though intended to help low-income families, can draw unwelcome attention to children's home circumstances. Sensitive administration of such schemes is therefore important.
- Differences in circumstance and appearance are a trigger for bullying, which can cause children to disengage, or physically withdraw from, school and learning.
- Though uniform can help disguise differences, the costs of uniform and other equipment for schooling can themselves create difficulties for families.
- Achievement may be compromised by lack of equipment (from pens to PCs) and inability to take part in extra-curricular activities like trips or exchange visits. This can result in them underachieving at school and limit children's options in later life.
- Young people acknowledge that there are issues with the administration of the EMA, but consider it an important enabler of access to post-16 education.
- Higher education is increasingly expected to become the preserve of the rich.

## Impact on aspirations around employment

- Young people identify a number of ways in which poverty can impact on aspirations around employment. There is a strong feeling that poverty can act to suppress ambition, though most young people involved in the consultation aspired eventually to find work.
- In addition to the disadvantages created by their experience of school, young people also identify a number of structural reasons behind their struggles to gain entry to employment.
- First amongst these is the lack of opportunities and increasingly competitive nature of the labour market. Youth and lack of experience can place young applicants at a serious disadvantage.
- Competition for apprenticeships is fierce, with a shortage of contacts and resources making it harder for young people from poor backgrounds to access these opportunities.
- The poor financial return on low-skilled work is a further problem, with young people living independently questioning whether they can afford to come off benefits.
- Some young people living with their families see greater benefit in entering employment, and indeed feel a responsibility to do so, even if there is a cost to them personally (for example, missing out on educational opportunities).
- Young people see increases in the cost of further and higher education as a deterrent to self-improvement and expect such increases to have a negative impact on aspirations. They predict negative impacts for both individuals and the wider society, with the latter becoming progressively more divided.

## Young people's recommendations for Government

- The Government should offer different types of support to relieve the immediate effects of poverty, for example, developing a more sensitive benefits system and introducing a real 'living wage'.
- The Government should provide support in managing money, budgeting and help to cope on a limited income.
- The Government should provide free access to services like youth and leisure centres and free or subsidised travel.

- Young people are also keen to see the creation of more work-based training and entry-level employment opportunities, to enable them to make the difficult transition to employment in an increasingly competitive labour market.
- Young people want more support to access higher education, and the reduction of income differences through pay reviews and taxation.

## Final comments

The findings of this study complement and reinforce those of previous research, in particular those around the impact of poverty on social life, education and employment. What does perhaps make this current work distinctive is that it was undertaken after a change of political leadership and at a time when the policy landscape is shifting rapidly. Children and families living in England are experiencing quite challenging economic times with dramatic cuts in public spending. These contexts have clearly fuelled the debates, leading to a number of new issues being identified and others being spoken about with increasing importance (for example, the withdrawal of the EMA, the raising of the cap on university tuition fees and rising youth (age 16-24) unemployment). By adding to the evidence base, it is hoped that young people's voices will have a greater presence within current policy discussions and developments.

# 1. The context of the research

The latest figures show that 2.8 million children in the UK (around one in five children) live in 'relative poverty' (DWP, 2010).<sup>6</sup> Though the number of children and young people living in poverty is believed to have fallen by around half a million over the past decade, a significant number continue to be disadvantaged by social and economic circumstances beyond their control. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child criticised the Government in 2008 for having unacceptable levels of child poverty. It also expressed concerns about significant inequalities which have serious implications for life chances.<sup>7</sup> Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that all children have the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their needs. In addition, Article 4 states that the Government must take "*all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures*" to ensure the realisation of rights protected under the UNCRC.

Work to end child poverty is seen as a high priority by the Office of the Children's Commissioner and, under the Child Poverty Act 2010, the Government has a legal obligation to eradicate child poverty by the year 2020. Other responsibilities associated with the Act include the production of a revised child poverty strategy on a three-yearly basis.

The new coalition Government is expected to publish its first child poverty strategy in 2011. It has already taken preparatory steps which include establishing a new social justice cabinet committee, and commissioning independent reviews on poverty and early intervention (led by Graham Allen)<sup>8</sup> and poverty and life chances (led by Frank Field)<sup>9</sup>. One of the key recommendations from the Field review is that the new child poverty strategy should switch its focus away from targets and measures of poverty based on material income, to a set of life chance indicators. This recommendation is based on evidence from the review that children's life chances are strongly influenced by their development in the first five years of their life. The review concludes that factors such as family background, parental

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<sup>6</sup> Based on a definition of poverty as having a net disposable income (before housing costs) which is equivalent to 60 per cent, or less, of the contemporary median. DWP (2010). *Statistics: Households Below Average Income (HBAI)*. [online]. See: <http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/index.php?page=hbai> [accessed 1 February 2011].

<sup>7</sup> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations, 2008. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/CRC.C.GBR.CO.4.pdf> [accessed 24 March 2011].

<sup>8</sup> Allen, G. (2011). *Early Intervention: the Next Steps. An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government*. London: Cabinet Office [online]. See: <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/early-intervention-next-steps.pdf> [accessed 1 February 2011].

<sup>9</sup> Field, F. (2010). *The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults: the Report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances*. London: Cabinet Office [online]. See: <http://povertyreview.independent.gov.uk/media/20254/poverty-report.pdf> [accessed 1 February 2011].

education, good parenting and opportunities for learning and development in these early years matter more to children than money in determining their future potential.

In preparing the child poverty strategy, the Government is required to undertake a wide-ranging consultation process to identify key issues of concern and possible solutions. Whilst the Department for Education's Children and Youth Board has provided one channel for canvassing children and young people's views, the Child Poverty Unit is keen to ensure the strategy takes account of wider perspectives, including those of children and young people with direct experience of poverty. A request was therefore made to the Office of the Children's Commissioner to make arrangements for further consultative activity. The Office of the Children's Commissioner commissioned the NFER to undertake this work.

This research is not unique in its focus on children and young people's portrayal of the experience of living in poverty. Prior work by Save the Children, for example, includes: Horgan (2009);<sup>10</sup> Ark and Nott (2009);<sup>11</sup> Woodhead and Sexty (2006);<sup>12</sup> and Crowley and Vullamy (2002).<sup>13</sup> However, an extensive review of research literature commissioned by the CPU in 2009 concluded that "*qualitative research with adults, and especially children who are experiencing poverty, is still a relatively new and developing field*" (Ridge, 2009, p.1). By adding to this evidence base, it is hoped that young people's voices will have a greater presence within current policy discussions and developments.

The findings of this study complement and reinforce those of previous research, in particular those around the impact of poverty on social life, education and employment (see, for example, Crowley and Vullamy, 2002)<sup>11</sup>. Subtle differences in the composition of research samples (for example, by age and location) might explain the variation in emphasis given to different themes and issues. What perhaps makes this current work distinctive is that it was undertaken after a change of political leadership and at a time where the policy landscape is shifting rapidly. Children and families living in England are experiencing quite challenging economic times with dramatic cuts in public spending. These contexts have clearly fuelled the debates, leading to a number of new issues being identified and others being spoken about with increasing importance (for example, the withdrawal of the Education Maintenance Allowance, the raising of the cap on university tuition fees, and rising youth (age 16-24) unemployment.

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<sup>10</sup> Horgan G. (2009). *Speaking Out Against Poverty: Voices of Children Living in Disadvantaged Areas*. Northern Ireland: Save the Children.

<sup>11</sup> Ark, A. and Nott, J. (2009). *Ending Child Poverty: Making it Happen. Report of Consultation Events with Children and Young People for the Government Child Poverty Unit*. London: Save the Children.

<sup>12</sup> Woodhead, P. and Sexty, C. (2006). *Children and Young People Speak Out on Poverty: A Report on a Consultation with Children and Young People in England*. London: Save the Children.

<sup>13</sup> Crowley, A. and Vulliamy, C. (2002). *Listen Up! Children and Young People Talk About Poverty*. Cardiff: Save the Children.

## 2. The child poverty consultation

### 2.1 What did we want to find out?

The Children's Commissioner wanted to hear children and young people's views on:

- what life is like for children and young people who do not have a lot of money
- why children and young people are poor, and
- how the Government can make a difference to the lives of these children and young people.

### 2.2 How did we select the young people?

In convening our discussion groups, we wanted to include as many children and young people with direct experience of poverty as possible. Therefore, we chose to locate our consultations (for the most part) in areas of high deprivation, attempting to allow for different experiences of poverty by choosing five locations across England. Areas were selected using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI). This index ranks local authorities according to the proportion of children under the age of 16 that live in low-income households in an area. We selected four areas from the 10 most deprived authorities in England as ranked in the IDACI: Liverpool, Newham, Islington and Birmingham. We also chose a contrasting authority, North Yorkshire, which scored relatively low on IDACI<sup>14</sup>, but held the consultation event in the district of Selby, a small, semi-rural town with known pockets of deprivation.

In all cases, access to young people was via a key contact from the local authority children's services, typically the youth service or the participation team. The young people involved in the consultations often belonged to existing groups that met on a regular basis, and quite a few were familiar with sharing their views and experiences in a public setting (for example, as members of a school council, youth parliament or community group). Key contacts were asked to provide all young people interested in participating in the consultation with an information sheet (a similar letter for parents/carers was also provided). These documents explained the aims and purpose of the study, the subject areas to be covered, the methods to be used, the research ethics (including details about consent, anonymity and confidentiality) and gave contact details for the research team. At the start of each discussion group, time was taken to go over the information again.

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<sup>14</sup> In the bottom 20 authorities.

## **2.3 Who was involved?**

A total of 73 children and young people took part in the consultation events. There were more young females than young males in the sample and their ages ranged from 10 to 20, with an average age of 14-17 years. The concentration of young people in their mid-teens may be a factor in the attention given in discussions to certain themes. The nature of the recommendations that were made may also be a result of the age-related interests of contributors. The size and composition of the sample means that any generalisations should be made with caution.

The participants had a wide range of backgrounds and experiences and included, for example: young people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities; those in care or having left care; teenage parents; young (ex) offenders; young people not in education, employment or training (NEET); young people who are HIV positive; lesbian gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) young people; and those from single parent families. Many young people revealed that they or their families were in receipt of Free School Meals, the Education Maintenance Allowance, and/or benefits of other sorts. These indicators of low income suggest they are likely to fit commonly used definitions of poverty. This was not however the case for all participating young people. Despite focusing the consultations on areas with a high proportion of low-income households, there was inevitably some variation in young people's personal circumstances.

## **2.4 What happened?**

A series of discussion groups were held with young people between November 2010 and January 2011. The discussion groups lasted up to one hour and researchers facilitated the discussions by asking young people a series of open-ended questions about their views of child poverty today. Young people could speak about their personal experiences of poverty and the experiences of other children and young people that they knew. Each participant received a gift voucher as small token of thanks for their involvement. With permission from the young people, each session was audio-recorded. Verbatim notes were analysed by the two researchers who conducted the discussion groups; these notes provide the basis of this report.

## **2.5 What does this report cover?**

This report sets out the findings of the consultation and begins with a chapter outlining how young people perceive poverty. Chapter 4 provides details on how living in poverty impacts on children and young people's lives and life chances and Chapter 5 details young people's recommendations for Government (i.e. how the situation could be improved).



A separate report has also been produced for children and young people. That shorter report sets out the key findings of the consultation more briefly and simply. It also explains how the findings are being used.

### 3. How do children and young people perceive poverty?

Many of the children and young people involved in the consultation events reflected on their own circumstances during the discussions. Describing their lives, young people told us, for example: *“We don’t know what it’s like to live nice and with money”* and *“most people I know have had a sort of background where they haven’t had much money to be brought up on.”*

Some of our participants were not in education, employment or training (NEET) and some had parents/carers who were either unemployed or in low-income jobs. Young people also spoke about themselves and their families receiving benefits. Quite a few told us that they were eligible for grants such as the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA),<sup>15</sup> or received Free School Meals.<sup>16</sup> A few young people also told us they were living in social housing. While some adults might view these things as indicators of deprivation, the young people themselves had a varying awareness of their own disadvantages. By their own definitions, none of the young people we spoke to thought of themselves as ‘poor’ or ‘living in poverty’.

Young people said they very rarely used the terms ‘poor’ or ‘poverty’. Instead, they were more familiar and comfortable using expressions such as ‘less well off’, ‘low income’, ‘low paid’ or ‘struggling’. One young person said: *“It is not a generic term for someone to say, ‘oh, I am living in poverty’. I wouldn’t use the term poor. I’d just think they were less well off than I am.”*

When young people were asked about what they thought it was like to live in poverty, they typically referred to very extreme circumstances, including homelessness and famine. Often young people felt that those living in poverty were people in other parts of the world.

*“I thought poverty was in other countries abroad, like the adverts on the telly... People would say that people on council estates are in poverty but really they’re not when you think about it because there are worse people, aren’t there?”*  
**Girl, Birmingham**

*“... to me poverty’s when you have nothing, you’ve got no money to go anywhere, do anything, and you’re surviving on the bare minimum... but I’ve always seen people get by, with a little.”*  
**Boy, Birmingham**

<sup>15</sup> EMA eligibility has been based upon the total yearly income of the parent(s) a young person has been living with (including step-parents). In England, the top qualifying level of income was £30,810. EMA is no longer available to new applicants

<sup>16</sup> Currently children whose parents are in receipt of one of the following benefits are entitled to receive Free School Meals: income support; income-based jobseeker’s allowance; an income-related employment and support allowance; support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; child tax credit.

Young people did, however, recognise that there are different types of poverty and talked about the notion of absolute poverty, where people are destitute and unable to afford the essentials of life (such as accommodation, food, heating and hot water), as well as relative poverty (where people have fewer resources than others and can afford the essentials, but nothing else).

### Young people's definitions of poverty

"There are different levels of poverty and different levels of being poor. One is that you might not have the latest trends like everyone else and the other is where you are living in really deprived conditions and it is having an effect on your physical and emotional well-being." **Boy, Liverpool**

"Us all sat here now we're not poor at all ... People who are living on the streets starving that's what you call poor ... they have to fight every day for food just to get by. They have got nothing." **Girl, Liverpool**

"You can't consider someone who is just slightly poor to be completely poverty stricken – they are at two different ends of the scale. If someone is really struggling in the house, has no heating, and can't afford anything else, then they are poverty stricken. Poor people on a certain scale can afford home heating and warm water so they are not as bad off as what child poverty is." **Girl, Liverpool**

A small number of young people also alluded to the concept of emotional poverty. They suggested that a person could have financial wealth, yet could still experience poverty if they did not have opportunities for positive, loving and encouraging relationships and experiences: "*Money doesn't make you happy, it's the people who you've got around you.*" Some young people, while accepting that neither they nor their parents had much money, were hesitant about describing themselves as poor, acknowledging that the affection, guidance and support they received from parents made up for the material items they had to go without.

Young people were worried about the current economic climate and the impact this could have on the financial situation of them and their families. They raised concerns about 'new' groups of people becoming poor as a result of losing their jobs (through redundancies) or because of increases in the cost of living. Some children held the view that life would be much more difficult for families experiencing sudden and unexpected poverty than for those with longer-term experience.

## Young people's views on new groups of people becoming poor

"There are children that have grown up in poverty and I know it sounds terrible, but it's not as bad for them, because they're used to it by the time they get to an older age. But say they grow up in a middle-of-the-road working class family, or any more well off family and they go through bankruptcy or whatever and then they go from having everything they want, to having literally nothing. In a way it's worse for them, because they have to make a major adjustment to something that they're not used to. They've been brought up used to getting what they want and all of a sudden they have to completely change their whole lifestyle, because their circumstances have changed." **Boy, Liverpool**

"If you have lived in a family that has always been poor, then you will be strong. But at the minute, with redundancies and stuff, if you had a lot of money and then you are suddenly poor it would cause a lot more damage, it would be harder for people." **Girl, Selby**

Although children and young people felt that those who were extremely poor could be identified by their physical appearance, and sometimes from where they lived, the condition of their home or potentially by their lack of friends, they also concluded that some children and young people living in poverty were difficult to identify and therefore support.

"I don't think generally people would know that they [other children] are in poverty... We don't know what to look for in poverty because we don't see it. When I think of what poverty is, it's not having the stylish clothes, struggling to get food. We wouldn't know what to look for." **Boy, Selby**

Each of the discussion groups acknowledged that children and young people who are poor are treated differently. Young people spoke about the stigma associated with being poor and not wanting to let others know about their circumstances. They were particularly concerned about their peers knowing they were entitled to free school meals, and about admitting to not having enough money pay for social activities, school trips, or holidays. They told us about being too embarrassed to ask for help and reluctant to receive it when it was offered.

### Young people's views on the stigma of being poor

"When I was at secondary school, I think that I was able to get Free School Meals or something, but I didn't want to have that status, I didn't want to be the one, 'oh, her family can't afford to whatever'. So I told my mum to stop it and I paid for my own meals and obviously it got tougher for my mum." **Girl, Newham**

"I tried to pay for one of my friends once and she was really offended. She felt like it was charity and she felt really embarrassed about it." **Girl, Liverpool**

"I think that there is support for low-income families, but maybe because of the social pressures people are too embarrassed to actually go talk to these people, because they think that they are going to have a negative thought about them." **Girl, Selby**

The groups were asked to think about why children and young people are poor and participants came up with a wide range of responses. There was agreement that poverty is related to income and difficulties finding employment. Several young people shared personal experiences of the difficulties they faced in their efforts to improve their circumstances: *"I really want a job, and I'm kind of a bit trapped, because it's very hard to get a job. I think that's the major problem."* Young people were very concerned about being stuck in a cycle of poverty and predicted an ever-widening gap between the rich and poor. They returned again and again to the subject of the withdrawal of the EMA, the expected increases in higher education tuition fees, and the impacts of these developments on their prospects with regard to future employment.

### Young people's views on the cycle of poverty

"It's only going to be the rich people that are going to be able to afford to go to university and get the better jobs, and the people that are in poverty are still going to be in poverty. There's going to be a wider gap between people in poverty and the rich people – there won't really be much in between, there's going to be huge divisions in society." **Boy, Birmingham**

..."young people are actually the worst hit and they are going to end up stuck in a cycle of poverty because they can't get the education they need, they can't get the jobs they need, and it is just going to end up being a place where it is just going to continue with generations of poverty because they just can't escape from it, and unless something is done to stop that, because this big society idea isn't going to work, the people who are poor aren't going to be looked after by other people, whereas the millionaires are still going to have their nice lives. Young people in poverty are the worst hit, unless something changes then it is going to be stuck like this for generations." **Girl, Selby**

Others concluded that for some individuals, poverty is not linked to lack of opportunity but instead is caused by a lack of motivation, including the drive to engage with education and the impetus to work. In some cases, they felt people were reluctant to change their own circumstances because of their over-reliance on the benefits system, seeing this as an easy option.

### Young people's views on how motivation contributes to poverty

"But normally households suffering from poverty, you find there can be a lack of motivation in the education sector, because of lack of funds to go on school trips... or de-motivation to even get out of bed to go to school, because parents could have had a poor school experience, meaning it could rub off on the kids." **Boy, Birmingham**

"If you're 18 and live at home, you get £100 [Jobseekers Allowance] a fortnight... I was living at home and getting Jobseekers for a couple of months and it just never seemed to end, my bank balance most weeks was higher than my mum's." **Boy, Birmingham**

"If you can't get a job, there's Jobseekers Allowance, which for some people, when you're 18 or so, you're happy to live off it, but if you're getting money for doing nothing, there's no motivation [to work]." **Boy, Birmingham**

Some of the young people we heard from also associated poverty with family circumstance and referred to poverty across the generations: *"It tends to follow the family."* They also linked poverty with family breakdown and single parents. A few individuals spoke about young people experiencing poverty as a result of disputes with their parents and a desire to seek independence at an earlier age, which required them to support themselves. In some cases young people linked poverty to family size, concluding, for example, that because they had a large number of brothers and sisters their parents found it more difficult to pay for essentials (the point being that their income was not proportionate to the number of children they had): *"I know quite a few people that've got three [children]. I'm the eldest of three, and I know friends that've got four, five kids... there's just no space [in the house], and money's going onto things like food, which is going up [in price], so other things are a struggle..."* Equally, young people commented on the benefits and grants their families received, which did not always take into account the number of children in a household.

In some groups, young people acknowledged that families' inability to budget could also be contributing to their difficult circumstances. There was criticism of the relative ease with which families could get credit to pay for often unnecessary material goods, whilst being without the means to pay back their debts.

"No-one now knows how to budget – you see something nice, you buy it. It's that, the way things go now you see the new i-phone and everyone goes out and puts a contract on it. People are going out and buying things they don't need and then struggling with things they do need." **Boy, Birmingham**

"I think there should be more support for parents before they consider getting credit cards and loans from banks and stuff as well as social services. They need to be a lot more sensible about it. So many families coming up to Christmas are getting loans and credit cards to pay for presents and will be struggling to pay that back and not be able to buy food when the 1st of January comes." **Girl, Liverpool**

## 4. The impact of poverty on the lives of children and young people

As set out in Chapter 3, the children and young people we spoke to did not regard themselves as ‘living in poverty’, though in policy terms many of them would be. Instead, they define their situations by their experiences. The impacts and implications of poverty for young people’s lives and life chances could be grouped into the following themes:

- Material circumstances and social life
- Family and community
- Education and training
- Aspirations around employment.

### 4.1 Impact on material circumstances and social life

Those involved in the consultation events told us that being poor and living in poverty means that children and young people can often miss out on a range of material things. There was overwhelming agreement among the young people we spoke to about the pressures from their peers, and society more widely, to own certain material items such as branded clothing, mobile phones and personal computers. The popular culture for ‘throw-away’ fashion and rapidly changing technology can mean a product is ‘out of date’ in a matter of weeks or months, which places an additional burden on those who are poor. One young person told us: *“The Government need to stop putting the price up on everything, and stop bringing out so much new stuff, and then kids wouldn’t be under too much pressure.”*

“If there’s a non-uniform day and you’re wearing the cheapest clothes, you get criticised for it. Whereas if you wear [name of clothing brand] or something like that, you’re the coolest person on the planet. Or it’s what phone you have, or it’s what bag you have.”  
**Boy, Birmingham**

There was also a view that there was an expectation from teachers and schools that young people would have personal computers and internet access at home, and without such resources, young people felt at a considerable disadvantage to their peers. This is discussed further in Section 4.4. Similarly, limited access to technology, particularly mobile phones and the internet meant that young people were more socially isolated, because of the inability to communicate with their peers outside of school.



Young people associated poverty with appearance. There was consensus from the groups that not having fashionable clothes, shoes and accessories meant a child would stand out as being different from their wider peer group. Although this pressure is experienced by both girls and boys, and spans age groups, one young person acknowledged that the situation could be particularly difficult for boys: *“There are obviously branded clothes for girls, but it’s a lot cheaper for girls to get clothes. I think if boys want to look good and get the branded stuff, it is really, really expensive. Especially jeans, especially things that people talk about and people like, they’re really, really expensive. And girls aren’t necessarily expected to wear that brand, or wear so many branded clothes.”*

Young people made strong links between being poor and being bullied. Intimidation and torment was often associated with the way someone looked (particularly their manner of dress). Even in the school environment, where many of the young people we were required to wear uniforms, there was an acknowledgement that disadvantaged young people could be identified as being different. Young people were aware they were being judged by others in this way and talked about how it affected their own well-being and that of their peers. One of our contributors, for example, described how being bullied could make young people feel ‘less of a person’, and ‘worthless’.

### Young people’s views on the links between poverty and bullying

“Kids will pick on you at school – it’s unbelievable – if you don’t have the same lunch bag as them, or you haven’t got a new jacket, or a new bag, they’ll pick on you and say ‘That looks like c\*\*\*! And your hair looks like – you look poor. Just something, they’ll pick on you for the littlest thing.” **Girl, Islington**

“If you’re in poverty, or you don’t have much money and you’re just trying to get by, you suffer mentally, because you get bullied, unless you’re strong enough to shrug it off.” **Boy, Birmingham**

“Kids who are poor are more likely to get bullied. You get picked on if you don’t have the right shoes on. You’d get picked on because of the way you look if you’re poor.” **Girl, Liverpool**

“I think just attitudes towards people that are poor, aren’t always positive and growing up you see that. Unless you have got the stylish clothes, the best car, everything, you are not going to have it easy.” **Boy, Selby**

Although young people in the discussion groups did not report cases of physical violence, they talked about the experience of social aggression and indirect bullying (for example, being isolated from friendship groups and the subject of cruel gossiping). This was characterised by name-calling, bullies refusing to associate with them, and bullies placing pressure on the wider peer group not to associate with them either. As a result, developing and maintaining friendships was said to be difficult for those who were poor. One girl told us: *“I think part of the issue is that you can only get true friends that are always going to be there for you if you can make friends in the first place, and it will often be hard to do that if you are living in such a deprived state that you look like a bit of a mess and no one wants to talk to you.”*

### Young people’s views on the links between poverty and social exclusion

“If you’re seriously, poor and you are just scraping by then the school experience would be horrible. Kids are cruel and you can just imagine if someone has got on the oldest possible clothes and stuff and who really struggle then the whole school experience would be horrible for them. The amount of friends they would have would be affected and how they would be treated from fellow pupils in the school would have a serious affect on them. You probably would have less friends because of it, because as much as anyone likes to think they’re not judgemental about things like that and that you’d be friends with everyone, people would judge them. If someone is sticking out like that, then no one is really brave enough to go over to them so that would have an effect on them.” **Girl, Liverpool**

There was a perception that material wealth brought confidence, and young people were intimidated by some of their more affluent peers: *“We all know the people who are well off ... they could open their mouth and direct someone, be wearing certain clothes, the person with swagger. The person at the bottom was the person who couldn’t, and was afraid to.”* The young people we spoke to also felt that not having the same things that other children had was difficult to cope with. In some cases, the pressure to fit in and own similar material possessions to those of their friends meant some children turned to crime.

“Cause you’ve got some old trainers and they’ve got holes in and you can’t afford a new pair children will get the p\*\*\* taken out of them, people will get bullied for things like that, and because their mum don’t have no money ... That’s when kids want to go out and rob things to get a bit of money.” **Boy, Birmingham**

Young people were not only identified as being poor by their own possessions, but also by those of their wider family. Judgements were made by their peers, for example, based on the state of the family home and type of car (if any) their parents drove. Young people acknowledged the difficulties their parents faced in not being able afford to buy the material goods their children wanted, with some going into debt as a result.

Another key concern for young people was that children living in poverty often miss out on experiences because of the cost of activities. Young people told us about the negative impact being poor could have on a young person's social life. They described, for example, how those who were poor were excluded from social networks and discussions because they were unable to experience the same opportunities: *"If you are poor you can't socialise in the same ways as your other friends can. Say if they're going to the cinema ... No matter how much of a tight knit friendship group you can have in school everyone's got to be there ... but if you can't socialise with them outside of school, you can feel bad when you're inside of school when they're talking about what they've done at the weekend when you couldn't be there."*

Some of the young people we spoke to mentioned that their parents were unable to afford their own vehicles. Others who were old enough to drive themselves also talked about the prohibitive costs of owning and running a vehicle, including driving lessons, the test and the costs of insurance. A good number were therefore reliant on public transport, but had serious concerns about the cost of fares and adequacy of services. One girl told us: *"Selby is pretty remote, there is like [only] three or four buses a day. So if your parents don't have a car it is pretty hard to get anywhere, because there is like literally no other way unless you walk. It is about an hour to walk to town from where I live."* Along with the difficulties this presented young people with in terms of accessing their places of education and employment, there were knock-on effects for opportunities to engage in social activities and maintain friendships.

"I used to know someone who was in our football team and he couldn't play the football match due to transport and it was a big shame because we really needed him, but he didn't have the money or the car to get from the place where we were playing the match back home."  
**Boy, Selby**

Children also talked about the impact of poverty on the ability to eat well. Some young people receiving Free School Meals, for example, commented the amount they received did not cover the full cost of a meal: *“You only get £1.85 on your little ticket, but when you go up to that stand to get your dinner, for most of the stuff you’ve got to add money to your ticket anyway, your ticket don’t cover your meal.”* Young people also told us that healthy food tended to be more expensive and acknowledged that generally food prices were increasing as incomes were falling. This impacted not only on the amount of food families purchased, but also the type: *“If they are taking benefits away from people with lower incomes, they can’t afford healthy foods, so they just won’t eat healthily.”*

## 4.2 Impact on families and communities

For several of the children involved in the consultation, family was seen as a valuable resource, with one commenting: *“Us all sat here now, we’re not poor at all ... We’ve got somewhere to live, and mums and dads.”* Similarly, another young person remarked that *“your family is more important than money. Ten times more important. And it will always come first ... Some people can be rich, and they’ve got no mum, they’ve got no dad, they live by themselves, and they’re lonely.”* Children and young people suggested that life in poor families was distinctive in several respects, not all of which were negative.

One young person surmised that poor families *“might be closer together and more of a family than some other people are. Because they would have had to be, they have had to muscle together to get everything, they have had to scrape everything and they have had to be together, whereas other families [haven’t]”*. Young people in this situation explained how their family, in particular their parents, played an important practical role, equipping them with essential life skills: *“When you can’t afford much, you know how to spread it out between food, drink, bills and everything. My mum definitely knows how to do that and she’s slowly teaching me, because when I’m older – she wants me to know these things so I don’t mess up my life, and put me into a bad position where I’m in debt.”* Others contrasted the experience of the poor child with that of their middle class peers, with ‘cash rich, time poor’ parents. A few children and young people, however, warned that it was possible for parents to be both cash poor and time poor, *“My mum works seven days a week ... [she] starts at like eight o’clock in the morning and comes home at like seven [pm]”*. Similarly, another of the older participants described how hard her mum had had to work, though she said this had not impacted negatively ‘in the longer term’ on their relationship.

“I remember when I was little, my mum always worked. She worked through Christmas and New Year – she’d always be working ... If you’re from a low-income family, your parents are always going to make the most, are always going to work to provide, to get you a future. So I do think that yeah, it does affect family time, but at the same time, me not spending that much time with my mum, it made me appreciate her more, because it makes me feel ‘Yes, she is trying to work to get money so that she can provide us with something’. I think physically our time [together] was restricted, but emotionally, I have an attachment with my mum.” **Girl, Newham**

Many of the young people perceived poverty as taking its toll on their parents, who wanted to give them as much as any other child, but simply couldn’t. For example, one commented: *“It must be really hard on your mum, dad, or carer even, to say ‘I’m really sorry, but we just haven’t got the money’”*. Similarly, another young person told us it was *“hurtful for parents to explain to their child that they can’t provide for them, for what they want”*. A third explained that this was particularly hard for parents when children were too young to appreciate the pressures they faced: *“It’s hard to explain, it’s like walking past a big toy shop, and you’ve got a little kid and they go ‘I want that!’ and you can’t really say ‘OK, I can get it for you’, but you can’t really say ‘No’. You’ve just got to like try and do your best to try and not make them upset, but try and get them past it, say ‘I’ll get you something else’ – that’s cheaper, but you pretend it’s better. That’s the only way.”*

Those young people involved in the consultations who were now parents themselves explained how having a child of their own raised their awareness of the difficulties their parents had faced: *“You want to give your child everything that you can, but then when you try and live like that you find that you can’t ... it stresses you out ... and then you realise how hard it was for your parents and then you don’t feel so angry, you think, ‘Well, they did the best that they could’.”*

Young people acknowledged that at times parents’ inability to get their children what they want might cause tensions between generations. Poverty was portrayed as potentially both a cause and consequence of family breakdown. On the one hand, young people told us, the strain of poverty could cause irrevocable damage to relationships between parents and with children. On the other, a change in family structure such as the departure of one parent could leave the remaining parent, and children, in very difficult financial circumstances. The current Government’s efforts to promote marriage and traditional family structures were seen by some as unhelpful and discriminatory:

“It [having no money] may cause arguments between the parents over how they going to pay for everything, which might affect the children [who] are hearing this.” **Girl, Selby**

“I’m from a single parent family with three kids, my dad doesn’t pay anything towards us and ... we’re not getting any benefits.” **Boy, Liverpool**

*“The Government at the minute is taking back family tax credits and making them ‘married couples’ tax credits. It’s a disgrace, because my mum will probably never get married, but she does have a family, and that’s very unfair to discriminate.”* Poverty as a product of family breakdown was also mentioned in the context of a breakdown in relationships between parent(s) and child.

“There’s sometimes teenagers that put themselves in that position – to get kicked out of the house. They’ve got the things that they want, they’ve got their parents there, they’ve got all what they want – they’ve got the money ... but they get themselves kicked out and their parents basically tell them ‘right, out of the house, you get your own flat, hostel, whatever, but this time you’re making your own money .... you’ll see it’s harder in real life!’ That’s what my mum has said to me.” **Girl, Islington**

Some of the older young people told us it was becoming harder to make a planned transition to independent living, with many young people continuing to live with their parents for longer than they would like to, due to a lack of financial resources. One young person described how suffocating life at home could become as you got older: *“Houses are tending to get smaller in size ... I’m the eldest of three [children and]... it [the lack of space] has a social effect, with not having any space really you tend to go out more, you just go out and do nothing on the streets.”*

In being out on the street, young people could be exposed to a range of dangers and negative influences. This was a particular concern for young people living in the heart of more deprived communities: *“Big flats in general, although there’s good people in there, there’s people in bad situations as well, that have other influences on the kids.”* This, in conjunction with a need to escape temporarily from the difficulties of day-to-day life, was seen by quite a few participants as channelling young people into risky

“I think it’s become a trend for kids to stay at home longer with their parents, rather than be able to get their own place, and I can imagine that being a huge problem.” **Boy, Birmingham**

Practically everyone I know lives with their parents, there’s very few that don’t. Which is a problem – it means people aren’t being independent, they can’t be.” **Boy, Birmingham**

“I think with poverty comes a lot of social problems because people feel like they need to somehow escape sometimes, so they’re more likely to do things that are going to negatively affect them ... in these areas where there is poverty we get horrendous problems, and I think that these young people need a lot more help and support to try and get out.” **Girl, Selby**

behaviours, including drinking alcohol, drug-taking, and crime.

Of course, young people's involvement with such behaviours is a problem not only for the individuals involved, but also for the wider community. In Birmingham in particular, young people expressed quite serious concerns about their own personal safety and that of their younger siblings. More generally, the situation was expected to deteriorate as cuts to youth services lead to closure of youth centres and activity programmes.

### Young people's views of their local communities

"Ten years ago, you could walk round the streets and that was not a problem but now, even my little brother – he's ten and he'll go anywhere in the daytime – as soon as it hits night-time, he won't go anywhere on his own. It isn't safe for the kids." **Girl, Birmingham**

"The youth centres actually play a major part for the people around this borough and how they grow up. I know some young people that come here, from a really gangster-type background, after coming here, they kind of like reform in a way that [recognises] this is not how you should become ... if it gets to a point where the youth centre closes, the community around it, the young people, will be on the streets and violence would go up, because of [young people] forming gangs." **Boy, Newham**

### 4.3 Impact on education and training

The children and young people we spoke to identify a range of ways that poverty affects their education. They told us that, first of all, poverty restricts choice: "*Poor households have to stick with the state schools around them.*" This is in part an issue of transport, i.e. being able to get to the school or college of choice. One young person whose family had been able to support her to attend a college in another town remarked:

*"It's a real shame if that [whether they can afford to get there] is the first thing that parents and children need to think about, especially if they want to go to a college where they do particular A-levels..* However, where schools are concerned, transport is not the only issue. Children told us that their options are also limited by schools' entry policies, in particular their catchment boundaries. A few young people made the connection between these constraints and the impact this would have for their social mobility.

"If you want to be able to go to a certain school, then you need to [be able to] arrange transport." **(Girl, Selby)**

"People from poorer backgrounds can't afford to go to [the best local school], because they can't afford to live in the catchment area." **(Girl, Selby)**

“I think that is a problem with York City, with the schools, all the houses are all quite expensive to live in and it is a very good school, so people from poorer backgrounds can't afford to go to that school because they can't afford to live in the catchment area, so it is a real problem in social mobility there.” **Girl, Selby**

The type of school children end up going to has consequences for their experience of education, with one young person, for example, describing how: *“A lot of teachers just can't be bothered ... a lot of [students] are violent and don't care about working ... it's linked to poverty, and people not caring ... if something bad's happening, everyone just turns a blind eye.”* And even in schools providing a more positive environment for learning, poverty may still affect young people's relationships with their teachers. Some young people, for example, perceived teachers as favouring children from more affluent families. Young people's comments also suggest a tendency, amongst some teachers, to stereotype and associate poverty with bad behaviour. Other young people drew attention to the variation in teachers' attitudes, one young man commenting: *“I suppose it's different in different schools – some teachers are posh, whereas in my school the teachers know what it's like to be on the road, and what it's like nowadays moneywise.”*

Young people indicate a reluctance to draw the attention of their teachers, or peers, to their home circumstances: *“They might ask us, but we wouldn't actually say anything.”* Several young people expressed discomfort, sometimes shared by their parents, about schemes (such as Free School Meals) intended to help poor children, but which draw attention to their poverty. However, children's comments suggest considerable variation in how schools manage access to Free School Meals, and that it is possible to develop systems which allow Free School Meal recipients to blend in with other canteen users.

“Teachers sort of have their favourites, don't they? Those who're confident and everything ... [and] teachers would rather help the kids they like better – even though they're not meant to, it does happen.” **Girl Selby**

“Some teachers will have that opinion that if they're poor, then they're going to be naughty – ‘so let's treat them that way!’ But there'll be some teachers who've grown up in poverty and then say ‘Right, I know what to do [here].’” **Boy, Selby**

“I know someone who is eligible for Free School Meals, but refuses to put her children on the programme. She says she doesn't want to be associated with someone who can't look out for her own children.” **(Boy Selby)**



There is immense pressure on children to fit in, with young people consistently reporting how differences in circumstance and appearance provide a trigger for bullying. One young person, for example, talking about more deprived peers, reported that *“A lot of them are tormented in school, they’re bullied ... they become recluses from school.”* This assertion, that poverty-related bullying may lead young people to disengage or physically withdraw from school, received widespread support from other young people involved in the consultation.

While school uniform can often help disguise differences, occasional events such as school outings and non-uniform days where young people could wear other clothes caused some young people considerable unease. However, other young people drew attention to the cost of uniforms and the challenge this presented for parents on low incomes, or with a large number of children of school age. It was suggested that difficulties providing the correct uniform can themselves leave young people open to bullying: *“A blazer can cost from thirty pound ... when my mum didn’t get the uniform on time, [she] didn’t want to send [my sister] to school ‘cause she was upset that she knew that she would get bullied... uniforms can create problems.”*

*“[Non-uniform days are] bad, because people be coming in in designer stuff ... and they’ll start cussing [you] ... That’s why some people, on non-uniform days, they come in their uniforms and say ‘Oh no, I forgot’.”* **Girl, Islington**

*“Even with school uniform there’s people who come in with like an expensive bag, and you can tell, so they do differentiate themselves a bit. But if there weren’t any uniform, imagine what they’d be coming in then? Then you’d actually really feel the difference.”* **Girl, Newham**

Several of the young people we spoke to drew attention to the additional costs associated with learning, and in particular secondary education: *“Secondary school’s like more expensive.”* In addition to stationery and books, the increasing reliance on technology to deliver the curriculum created difficulties for poor families. Moreover, it was suggested, the inability to take part in extra-curricular activities (from after-school outings to exchange visits) means that the education to which young people in poverty have access is narrower and more curriculum-limited.

*“In our school you have to buy your own pens, otherwise they say you’re not ‘ready to learn’ ... if we haven’t got a pen and pencil, we’d just sit there, ‘cause our teacher won’t lend us a pen to do our work ... they say ‘Buy a pen for 10p; it’s only 10p!’”* **Girl, Birmingham**

*“Schools are becoming computer-oriented, and it can be a problem if you haven’t got that access, or you’ve got very limited access.”* **Boy, Birmingham**

Many of the young people we spoke to were concerned that underachievement at school would have serious consequences for their options later in life: *“It seems that everything now, if you don’t do well at school, that’s it.”* They saw access to post-compulsory education (both further and higher) becoming increasingly challenging and many were anxious and angry about the withdrawal of the EMA. Whilst the scheme, or rather its administration, was recognised as having problems (some young people questioned whether the money was going to the right people), the resource itself was greatly valued by those who had access to it. It was perceived as an important ‘enabler’ for young people from poorer homes, funding their transport, equipment and food costs.

Young people from deprived backgrounds have historically been under-represented in higher education and those we spoke to expected this inequality to become increasingly pronounced. Higher education was expected to quickly become the preserve of the rich, reinforcing disadvantage and leading to a more markedly divided society. This belief was underpinned by the perception that achieving the necessary entry qualifications would become more difficult for young people in poverty, and that the increasing cost of higher education itself would be a barrier.

### Young people’s views of the EMA

“Why are they stopping it [the EMA]? It’s supposed to encourage people to go to school, so why are they going to stop it when it’s just going to make people not go?” **Girl, Islington**

“If they’re going to get rid of the EMA, then they need to start to think ‘Well, we need to pay for their travel, we need to pay for their food and their equipment’. They need to think about how they’re going to help them develop their future.” **Girl, Selby**

“[The EMA] actually helps people like me, because you can buy your necessities for college or sixth form, you can make sure you’ve got something to eat during the school day, and it also helps you not to worry about the bank of mum and dad. It gives you your independence and it teaches you to budget.” **Boy, Birmingham**

“They’re cutting the EMA, so people are going to struggle to go into further education. They’re lifting the cap on tuition fees, so they’re going to struggle to go into higher education.” **Girl, Selby**

“The cuts that are being made to education are meaning that even if a young person wanted to aspire to grow up and get a better job than their parents, they are going to stand back at a young age and think ‘I just can’t afford [the necessary education]’.” **Girl, Selby**

Young peoples' comments suggest some confusion about how the new university fees regime will operate (some people, for example, being under the impression that large up-front payments would be required). However, they also indicate that young people from low-income backgrounds may be more reluctant than their more affluent peers to take on a sizeable debt, and less convinced of the economic return on a degree. There was also a sense that increases in tuition fees might diminish young people's aspirations with regard to future career options.

#### 4.4 Impact on aspirations around employment

Many of the young people we spoke to were in the process of making, or thinking about, the transition from education to employment. They identified a number of ways in which poverty might impact on their opportunities and aspirations.

A few young people suggested that the experience of childhood poverty might be a powerful driver, motivating young people to work hard to 'better' themselves. One young person, for example, told us how her mother had not been able to afford to go university when she was young, but studied for two degrees at night school in later life. She told us: "*It teaches you to have a very strong work ethic.*" However, it was more common for young people to perceive poverty as suppressing ambition and aspiration. This was seen as particularly common where there was a history of benefit dependency in the family. These young people, it was argued, needed help to overcome this inherited acceptance of their circumstances, and to understand that life could be different.

Other young people, however, said that on the whole they believed young people did want to work, but were unable to. In many cases, it was suggested, the impact of poverty on education had an ongoing effect. For example, poverty-related bullying might affect attendance, which in turn affects achievement, meaning young people leave schools without the qualifications necessary to enter employment.

#### Young people's views on poverty and aspirations

"There are going to be people [around you] who'll say 'Oh well, you're poor, you're never going to get this or that, why are you bothering trying?'" **Boy, Selby**

"Growing up in poverty you might not aspire to be anything more than your parents, and think 'If they couldn't do it, why should I be able to?'" **Boy, Selby**

"If people are on benefits, often they think once they're on it there isn't much point in going any further than that ... people need to know there's somewhere to go" **Girl, Liverpool**

"You need people who have been in poverty and who have gotten out of it to say to people 'there are ways of getting out'" **Girl, Liverpool**

However, young people also identified a number of structural reasons behind their struggles to gain entry to employment. These coalesced around three inter-related themes: a general lack of opportunities; difficulties competing with older and more affluent applicants; and a sense that they could not afford to work.

Looking firstly at the lack of opportunities, several young people told us that *“There are loads of people on benefits who are trying so hard to get jobs and they genuinely can’t.”* They were aware that in the current climate university graduates were struggling to find jobs and felt there were good grounds for pessimism with regard to their chances of finding work. They also pointed out that people of all ages were struggling to find work.

### Young people’s views on employment opportunities

“We don’t have any industry, so we have a lack of opportunities ... there are none locally, really. There’s nothing big, locally, where you could work, there’s nowhere employing a large amount of workers.” **Boy, Birmingham**

“Teachers are saying to us now, ‘We feel sorry for your generation, because like jobs now [are so hard to get].’” **Girl, Islington**

“There just isn’t enough positions – that’s the problem, that’s why people have such a problem making that transition from school to work, because they have to fight against 50 other applicants for one position ... our chances are very slim.” **Boy, Birmingham**

“You can apply for work and employers just don’t bother getting back in touch, so you can feel down because you can be going for months on end and just not hear anything and you lose your motivation.” **Boy, Birmingham**

In such a competitive labour market young people from poor backgrounds felt they faced additional challenges, citing the stereotypes held by some adults of young people (particularly boys) associated with violence and drugs. In addition to having to combat these negative perceptions, young people’s lack of certified skills and experience made it hard for them to compete against older workers.

Young people acknowledged that there were programmes designed specifically to enable them to gain entry to employment and develop technical and vocational skills, but argued that there were insufficient places, and – as a consequence of their scarcity – fierce competition for these. Several of the boys we spoke to were very keen on the idea of apprenticeships, but said such opportunities were few and far between. The lack of openings meant that the field was highly competitive.

### Young people's views of apprenticeships

“With apprenticeships, they give you a trial and if they feel you're good enough they will take you on, but there's not enough of them around. Most companies now, they won't insure you, they haven't got the money to insure you.” **Boy, Birmingham**

“There's not many apprenticeships, where people take you on an apprenticeship that can lead to them taking you on on a job. You can get on a college course, but you can't get fully qualified.” **Boy, Birmingham**

“Getting on apprenticeships is as tough as s\*\*\*. You have to have certain grades, you've got to have a little bit of experience. But if you have experience, why would you want to apply?” **Boy, Birmingham**

Young people from poor backgrounds faced additional disadvantage, due both to material deprivation and their families' lack of connections (what sociologists might call 'social capital').

“Some jobs that you go for, like, the interviewers they won't understand that you can't like afford nice clothes, to look presentable for an interview.” **Girl, Islington**

“It's your parents, and them knowing the right people, to line their children up [for work].” **Boy, Birmingham**

The third obstacle for young people was the poor financial return on low-skilled work (£3.64 an hour for 16 and 17 year olds, and £2.50 for apprentices) and the increasingly insecure nature of employment (with young people noting the widespread use of temporary contracts with short notice periods). Where young people were living independently of their parents, in some cases with children of their own, they questioned how they could support themselves without access to benefits. One young man who professed himself keen to work said that unless he could find employment offering considerably more than the minimum wage, he simply could not afford to take it up. Summing up his situation, he told us: “*I'm trapped.*”

“If I was to get a job, there’s no way possible I could keep my house. I would lose my house straight away, because how am I going to afford to pay my rent, my council tax, my water, my TV licence, my gas, my electric, shopping, clothes for me and my daughter, and to live? I’m not going to be able to do that on the wage you get, the minimum wage – it’s ridiculous!”

**Girl, Birmingham**

Of course, not all the young people we spoke to were looking to make direct entry to the labour market. Quite a few saw the ideal as continuing in further and higher education, with a view to entering (hopefully more highly paid) employment further into the future. However, once again they said decisions would be influenced by the financial circumstances of their families. In some cases, young people felt a responsibility to contribute to the family income by entering employment at the earliest possible opportunity, regardless of their abilities or aspirations. In other cases, young people were not feeling this pull into employment, but were deterred from continuing with their education by the associated costs.

#### **Young people’s views about future education and employment**

“What people don’t realise is it puts a lot of pressure on the young people themselves ... from a young age a lot of them feel that they have to instantly go out and find a job to help their parents, to keep a stable family home and provide food. Which then results in a lot of them not fulfilling their dreams of going to college or uni, because they need to go out and get a job.” **Girl, Islington**

“Poor people are starting behind the starting line, below the bottom of the ladder. Education is what we need to develop. Government need to push education, not hold it back, or aspirations will drop drastically and people won’t aspire to being anything more than at the starting point.” **Boy, Selby**

“I want to go to college and I want to become a social worker, but I’ve got a little girl so it’s difficult. The Government would only give me so much childcare, but that wouldn’t cover the amount of time that I would have to be in college, so then I’d have to find the extra money, but I haven’t got that extra money! I can just about afford to live daily, and that’s stretching stuff out. You can’t achieve the things you want to achieve in life.” **Girl, Birmingham**

“I’m applying [to university], and I’m absolutely c\*\*\*ing myself about when I’ve completed it, because ... that’s a lot of money I’m going to have to pay back.” **Boy, Birmingham**

## 5. How the Government can make a difference to the lives of children and young people in poverty: children and young people's views

The children and young people we spoke to expressed concern about the future and how the poorest among them would be affected by the recession and expected cuts to public services. They saw it as becoming increasingly hard for poor families to improve their circumstances, and for disadvantaged children and young people to escape the poverty trap on transition to adulthood. There was some cynicism about the Government's commitment to hearing and acting on their views.

"I'm not being rude, no offence, but we've just sat here for like an hour and how long talking about it, but what effect are you going to see? How long have we been doing stuff like this? Before they did all the cuts... it wasn't just us, it was all over Birmingham, we were one of the little groups, there were so many of us. We've been to racism events, we've been to the council, and we've had little meetings where we can approach [councillors] and ask questions – and none of it has done any good. It's still exactly the same ... We could sit here again and say everything we said to you, we could sit here next week and say it to somebody else, but it's not going to change anything." **Girl, Birmingham**

However, notwithstanding doubts as to whether anyone in power would act on their suggestions, they identified a number of things the Government might do to protect and help them and other children and young people like them, (in other words, those who are poor). Their ideas include:

- providing financial or in-kind support to relieve the immediate effects of poverty
- creating entry-level opportunities to ease the transition to employment and adult life
- tackling inequalities in society, for example through reducing wage differentials.

Their ideas are presented in more detail and in their own words in the boxes over the page. What is very clear is that children and young people see the Government as having a role and responsibility to address poverty and inequality. They expressed extreme scepticism about the likelihood and ability of lay members of the 'Big Society' to make a noticeable difference to poor children's circumstances and prospects. As might be expected, young people in their late teens were more familiar with the language and focus of current policy than younger participants. Recommendations also tended to become more employment oriented as the participants got older.

### **Support to relieve the immediate effects of poverty**

- A more sophisticated, non-discriminatory benefits system so that those who really need help get it, and those who don't, don't: "Everyone's circumstances are different and each case should be decided on its own merits", "The Government needs to look at families in more depth."
- A real 'living wage' that keeps pace with inflation: "They're putting the price up on everything, but nobody's money is going up."
- Help to manage money (for example, financial education) and help to cope on a limited income: "There needs to be more support so you learn how to get by, how to budget. More education to help you – stop you getting in with loan sharks and that kind of thing", "It's more about making people feel they can ask for help."
- Improvements to social housing, including greater support for young people wishing to live independently.
- Better free school meals offered more discreetly and more widely, with the value of the entitlement being sufficient for young people to get a variety of foods, not just the cheapest menu option.
- Crackdown on crime and disorder in deprived communities and provision of diversionary activities for young people: "It's about getting more youth services, and the Government sorting more stuff out for kids to do, so they've got better things to do."
- Free – and well publicised – access to facilities from youth and leisure centres to laundrettes: "Make sure there are places for parents to take their kids, so they don't have to scrimp and save", "There are lots of free activities, but it's about promoting them."



- Free (or at least subsidised) transport: “Raise a half-fare to 18 [years]”, “Rather than money being given to these people, things should be paid for instead like transport, possibly a free bus pass. Not one that would single them out from everyone else, but one that looked like ... [a] normal bus pass.”

### **Opportunities, at entry level, to ease the transition to employment**

- Help to identify local role models, people who have succeeded – against the odds – in making something of their life: “If you’ve got someone to say ‘Yeah, I started off at that level, and look where I am now!’ then they [young people] might have a better mindset”, “People need to know that there is somewhere to go from there and they don’t have to spend their entire life out of work.”
- Better training opportunities for young people, with ‘a little bonus’ (i.e. an incentive to complete) and encouragement to pursue them. “Youth groups are quite good because they can get people motivated to go into education and get where they want.”
- More jobs open to young people and ‘paid work experience’: “We can’t compete with them price-cutting in other countries, so we at least need to put money into companies to open up in England. And the Government needs to own them so they don’t move.”
- More incentives to gain work: “Support and benefits to help you get started’ (for example, free transport).”

### **A more equal society**

- Exerting greater control over the marketing and advertising of branded goods to young people, in order to inhibit the development of visible differences between groups.
- Directing the cuts away from young people ... “[and] think about how they are going to help them develop their future”.
- Offering more support to access higher education: for example, ‘grants and sponsorship’.

- Achieving a more equal distribution of wealth in society, by reducing the wage differentials within the public sector and taxing the rich more: “The very, very rich should be knocked down a peg or two.”
- Improving understanding of the origins and impact of poverty: “People should be taught more to respect poor people and not to look down on them”, “You’ve got to be in a person’s shoes in order to experience it”, “Maybe like [make ministers] spend the day in poverty, spend a day when they can only spend a limited amount of money and see how they can actually [manage] ... [or] make them live for a week – in a day they won’t learn much.”

## For more information

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