

## **The Foundation Years, independent review on poverty**

In June 2010, Frank Field, MP was asked by the Prime Minister to lead an independent review of poverty and life chances. Its final report, *The Foundation Years* published on 3 December, argues that the best way to improve life chances is to shift the emphasis of the child poverty strategy towards investment in early years provision which, it says, is more financially sustainable than the current approach, and also more effective. The Review found that children's life chances are most heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of life, and that family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years matter more to children than money. The Foundation Years should become the first pillar of a new tripartite education system: the Foundation Years leading to school years leading to further, higher and continuing education. In all, it makes 24 recommendations in total.

### **The review makes two Overarching Recommendations:**

- Establishing a set of life chance indicators;
- Establishing the 'Foundation Years' from womb to 5 as they key point for investment in child and family outcomes.

### **Key points:**

- Deeper focus on services for 0 to 5 year olds
- parenting (especially quality of parent-child relationships and parental engagement) and the home learning environment were the aspects of early childhood most often cited as having the greatest influences on positive outcomes and good life chances
- Fairness premium to begin in pregnancy
- Graduate led early play and learning for all disadvantaged 2 year olds.
- New SureStart contracts with payments by results;
- Proposes the appointment of Cabinet Minister for the Foundation Years
- increased early years support that helps parents to understand child development and offers a broad range of parenting advice is crucial
- More use of evidenced based practice - pooled data and better information sharing is essential
- Children's Centres the hub of activity for 0 to 5s – with more Graduates and teachers.
- Proposed GCSE in Parenting
- there is a need for a more holistic 'family approach' to both the design and delivery of services and the measurement of child poverty
- early years services for children and parents must be more effectively integrated and coordinated

- measures of child poverty could be enhanced by supplementing income measures with a range of carefully selected parent, child and environmental indicators
- wider role for the VCF sector, mutuals and cooperatives
- parental employment is a key route out of poverty
- quality and stability of housing is important. Overcrowding can contribute significantly to negative outcomes for children.

**Comment:**

This is an important review, addressing one of the most significant and intractable issues facing policy makers and practitioners; finding a more successful approach is crucial and the Government appears to have responded positively to the broad findings of the Review, if not yet to the detailed recommendations. The Review report draws together a substantial body of evidence to inform discussion between local authorities and their partners – particularly those serving predominantly disadvantaged communities – about how they might better order their resources and priorities to improve the position at a local level.

However some of the recommendations clash with policy already announced. In concluding that poverty cannot be solved by raising the income alone the review may conflict with the position taken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (which has supported the Child Poverty Unit to date) which concluded that eradicating poverty will require income transfer and a more equal society.

**More detailed summary:**

**Chapter 1 A Personal Commentary**

In this chapter, Frank Field sets out his own perspective on some of the issues covered by the review, including how his ideas on combating poverty have developed over the past four decades. He describes research showing that, while income is important, it is not the exclusive or even dominant cause of inter-generational poverty; factors such as home learning, environment, and quality of child care are so important that they led the Review to construct a set of Life Chances Indicators. These should inform efforts to make the life chances of children more equal through a focus on what the Review calls the ‘Foundation Years’.

**Chapter 2 Poverty and Life Chances**

This chapter illustrates the poor outcomes experienced by children from low income families and presents the social and economic case for tackling child poverty and improving life chances. It argues that a greater emphasis needs to be placed on life chances in order to ensure that today’s poor children do not grow up to be poor themselves, having to raise their own children in poverty.

Children from low income families in the UK often grow up to be poor adults. Whether poverty is measured by family income, socioeconomic status, or educational attainment, it blights the life chances of children. Compared to other children, those from households with low income or lower socio-economic status are: more likely to suffer infant mortality; more likely to have pre school conduct and

behavioural problems; more likely to experience bullying and take part in risky behaviours as teenagers; less likely to do well at school; less likely to stay on at school after 16; and more likely to grow up to be poor themselves. This is illustrated by the data presented in this chapter.

Gaps in outcomes and achievement between poorer children and their peers are observable from an early age and remain throughout childhood. So, in general, family income and social class are highly predictive of childhood development and adult outcomes. The Review group believes that using current child poverty rates to measure progress towards the long term goal of eradication has led to a focus on short-term outcomes, undermining a long term, sustainable approach, but that interventions in other childhood factors can overcome class and income in determining the life chances of poorer children.

### **Chapter 3 The Influences on Children's Life Chances**

This chapter sets out evidence on the most important drivers of children's life chances, starting in pregnancy and the early years. It makes the case for investment in early years services, in particular to support parents in their parenting role, to reduce inequalities in outcomes. As children develop, Government also needs to continue to invest in the most disadvantaged older children.

Whilst data does not generally allow for strict causality to be determined, there are a number of robust associations arising from longitudinal research which have led to a widespread consensus that factors in the home environment are the most important: positive parenting, the learning environment and parents' level of education. Other influential factors include healthy pregnancy, good childcare and early education, family background and income, parents' aspirations and involvement in children's learning, (older) children's own attitudes and behaviours, and the schools they attend.

### **Chapter 4 Building Foundation Years Services**

This chapter looks at what central and local government, voluntary sector and community bodies can do to ensure that disadvantaged children get the best start in life, and to minimise the chances of them being poor in adulthood.

It argues that, given the importance of the early years, Foundation Years provision should be treated as being as important as primary and secondary education. Programmes such as Sure Start, Family Intervention and pre-school can make a real difference, but much school and early years provision is of lower quality in deprived areas; services need to be better at engaging parents, and building on their strengths; more opportunities are needed to gain parenting skills, including through the school curriculum; the package of support from conception to age five should be formalised as the Foundation Years, and a Cabinet Minister should be appointed (working across the Education and Health Departments) to take responsibility for this approach. The Foundation Years should be universal (with Sure Start Children's Centres providing support for all parents, and a gateway for those needing more help); they should provide help for those who need it most, with increased funding for families in most need, targeted home visiting, and services in deprived areas brought up to the standard of those in more affluent areas; they should involve the community, improving the capacity of parents to help each other, and ensuring voluntary groups have the chance to run services; and they should be evidence-

based, with services that make a difference and a good understanding of whether they are reaching the children who need them most.

Evidence is reviewed, and a description offered of what the Foundation Years Service might look like, and how it might benefit a 'case study' family. This includes the actions necessary by a variety of agencies to bring about the changes needed, with illustrations drawn from real examples.

## **Chapter 5 A New Framework for Measuring Poverty and Life Chances**

This chapter sets out a new framework for measuring poverty and life chances, including a recommendation for a set of Life Chances Indicators and new measures of public service quality and severe child poverty. These measures are intended to complement the Government's existing indicators.

It argues that a major limitation of the existing child poverty measures is that they have incentivised a policy response focused largely on income transfers, which has stalled in recent years and is financially unsustainable, and that a more effective approach is to use a set of measures that will incentivise a focus on improving children's life chances, and ultimately break the transmission of intergenerational disadvantage. The Review identifies a small set of key factors in the early years which are predictive of children's future outcomes, including child, parent and environmental factors. It proposes a number of indicators with which to measure these factors, which will together form the new Life Chances Indicators.

The Review believes that the Government's existing child poverty measures have been designed to capture income and living standards, and that they need supplementing to ensure that they recognise the role that high quality public services can play in alleviating poverty. It also believes that Government should monitor the impact of policy on the very poorest children who experience prolonged financial and material deprivation. If the new indicators show improvements for each new cohort of children from low income families, then it can be expected that their future outcomes in adulthood will also be better. Short term progress on the Life Chances Indicators would be aligned with long term progress on tackling the effects of child poverty, which would improve the incentives for policy makers to invest in long term solutions.

## **Chapter 6 Overview of the Consultation Process and Summary of Formal Submissions**

This chapter provides an overview of the consultation process that the Review undertook and a summary of the predominant themes that were put forward through formal consultation responses. Frank Field and the Review team met with a wide range of stakeholders who fed into the Review, and 210 formal written submissions were received.

### **Annexes**

These set out:

- the recommended measures for Life Chance Indicators
- options for a new Measure of Service Quality
- a list of those who submitted formal submissions and/or spoke to the Review team, and a list of visits and seminars attended by the team
- a list of public statements made by Frank Field.