child poverty and local government

the local authority contribution to eradicating child poverty

September 2003
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This paper forms part of the work of the LGA's Social Inclusion Executive. For more information, see www.lga.gov.uk.
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The government placed child poverty high on its list of priorities when in 1999 at the Beveridge lecture, the prime minister, Tony Blair, pledged to halve child poverty by 2010 and eradicate it within a generation. In local authorities across the land this is an ambition that is shared. This joint commitment is encapsulated in one of the seven shared priorities for public services agreed by central government and the Local Government Association (LGA) in 2002:

‘Improving the quality of life for children, young people and families at risk, by tackling child poverty, maximising the life chances of children in care or in need and strengthening protection for children at risk of abuse’

Many local authorities have been committed to tackling the causes and effects of poverty and social exclusion for many years. Since the 1970s, local authorities have developed and acted upon anti-poverty strategies - and more recently social inclusion strategies. There is a wealth of experience within local authorities and their local communities upon which national policies can be built. However with almost one in three children in poverty, clearly much more needs to be done.

This paper aims to further the understanding of the contributions that local government - as community leaders, employers and service providers - has to make to the challenging task of eradicating child poverty.

**Income poverty**

Given that the government’s first child poverty target was to reduce by one quarter the number of children in low-income families by 2004/05, the LGA understands that the government has had to rely chiefly on increasing family income as the means of meeting this first step of the child poverty pledge. Clearly, increasing the weekly incomes of poor families is an effective and immediate way of lifting families out of poverty and it is primarily a task for central government’s tax and benefits policy. The LGA commends the government for the increased benefit and tax credit rates for the poorest families, and suggests that there is still more that needs to be done to ensure all families with children can afford the necessities of life.

Local government of course has a clear role to play in helping to ensure take-up of those entitlements, and in 2003/04 the LGA’s *quids for kids* campaign (a benefits and tax credits take-up campaign for children and families) is making a contribution.

Despite the national minimum wage and tax credit changes, there are still children in waged households who have not been lifted out of poverty. We suggest that there is more to be done to ensure that work does indeed provide the financial basis which families require.

**Recognising the other dimensions of poverty**

The LGA is pleased that central government has recognised on numerous occasions that poverty is not just about income, and that it understands that people’s expectations and opportunities are also affected by their education and skills, by access to quality health and social services, by decent housing and by the area in which they live, and its amenities including cultural and leisure facilities. Despite the complexity, it is important that the role of these other aspects in the eradication and prevention, is built into a strategy to achieve the child poverty pledge and funded accordingly. We therefore very much welcome the Treasury’s current cross-cutting review of child poverty and its acknowledgment of the role of public services.

The breadth of this examination is clearly to be determined by the outcome of the government’s current work to find an unambiguous long-term measure for child poverty.
“There are many dimensions to poverty that affect not only a child’s current living standard, but also their prospects in the longer term and into adulthood. Whilst low income is important to poverty, it is not the only dimension. A child’s quality of life is also important. Access to education, decent housing, good quality health service, a safe environment - as well as income - all affect the quality of a child’s opportunity.”

Preliminary conclusions, measuring child poverty consultation, Department of Work and Pensions, May 2003

The LGA is keen that the measure does indeed supplement the relative income target (which will remain for the 2004/05 Public Service Agreement) in order to recognise the importance of these other factors in the reduction of child poverty. We are reassured that this is the government’s aim, given the widespread support for an approach which includes some measure of material deprivation and for a tiered approach or multi-dimensional indicators to measure progress as well as low income.

We recognise that it would be difficult to acknowledge every single aspect of local service which has an impact on child poverty. However the LGA believes strongly that any dimension not directly recognised by the government’s measure should not be dismissed as irrelevant to achieving the government’s target.

Currently the government’s annual report on progress on poverty Opportunity for All uses a set of 17 indicators in addition to three on low income to monitor child poverty. This set can be categorised as:

• education - nine indicators;
• health - five indicators;
• worklessness - one indicator;
• child protection - one indicator; and
• housing - one indicator.

These - while a welcome start - do not encapsulate the range of activities carried on at a local level which could still make a vital contribution to achieving the child poverty goals; for example, provision of free sports or cultural activities, improving local transport and the local environment, access to good quality food at affordable prices, work to tackle fuel poverty and projects to promote financial inclusion. Early years work should make an impact on the education targets in the medium term and the provision of good quality childcare likewise should make a difference to progress on the worklessness indicator, but only if there are jobs to be had and other barriers to employment are also overcome.

It is important therefore that the message which comes with the publication of the government’s measure, due by the end of 2003, makes clear the wide range of factors which need to be tackled. Secondly, it is important that there are both incentives and rewards for local authorities that do tackle crucial issues which may only make a difference to the child poverty measure in the long-term. Without this practical encouragement, it could be difficult for all local authorities to play as full a role as they are able to and indeed wish to.

We hope to work with the government over the coming months to ensure that the critical contribution of local government is acknowledged and resourced. Indeed we are extremely pleased to be currently discussing terms of reference for an Accord between the LGA, the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury involving closer working on child poverty and a forum in which to progress these issues.
Local authorities have a combination of roles which touch children’s lives at so many points and in so many ways. Local authorities are thus uniquely placed to play a critical role in moving children out of poverty and preventing others facing poverty again later in life. They:

- unlike other local players, have democratic legitimacy;
- are the leading local partners for strategic planning and ensuring action;
- are instrumental in bringing together key local agencies in touch with children and families, and ensuring the voice of those families is heard;
- provide and commission a whole host of services; and
- have a scrutiny role, not only for council services, but also health and other services.

**Local authorities as community leaders**

In England and Wales, local authorities have a duty to prepare community strategies and a power to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their communities. The community strategy is almost without exception prepared by the local authority in conjunction with the Local Strategic Partnerships. These partnerships, of which the local authority are key members, bring together the key public service providers, as well as business, voluntary and community sectors, to develop and implement the community strategy. They attempt to ensure that as many members of the community as possible have a say in local issues. The community strategy provides an important vehicle for local authorities with partners to mainstream anti-poverty and social inclusion, through the full range of services including education, housing and health.

Within councils, work on poverty issues is not the sole preserve of officers. Elected members are extremely concerned about disadvantage in their wards, and a number of elected members have taken on social inclusion strategic roles. All cabinet members will now find that they are involved in the cross-cutting issues that impact on the poverty agenda. Elected members are in touch with their own communities and provide an invaluable insight into the needs of local families. Moreover there is often an expectation from local people that ‘the council should do something’; that expectation of turning to the local authority for solutions should be built upon.

Consultation of the local community and of service users is now an integral part of local authority ways of working, one of the tenets of the Best Value regime. Local authorities have been working with partners, including community groups, to find ways of involving not only community representatives, but also disadvantaged individuals, often called the ‘hardest to reach’.

The LGA has collaborated with the National Youth Agency in producing *Hear by right* on young people’s participation in local democratic processes which includes a set of standards against which councils can examine their current practices.

**Wiltshire’s Tomorrow’s Voice Youth Panel**, set up in 2000, consists of 2,000 13-18 year olds from all over the county, recruited through schools and youth and community centres.

**Dream, Oldham** is an independent body run by twenty-five young people aged 15-16, supported by local authority youth workers, and concerned with representation, inter-community conflict and youth friendly services.

**Wirral council** supported young people in the design and building of their own leisure provision at Birkenhead.

Local authorities are key players in local neighbourhood renewal strategies and are catalysts for economic regeneration. Regeneration is not only about providing business parks and the
like. It is also about delivering the sort of area which people taking up the new jobs will want. It is about housing, schools, childcare, leisure facilities, parks, entertainment, the working and social environment, all of which local government has a leading role in planning, procuring and developing.

**Local authorities as employers**

Local government is often the largest employer in an area, employing 2.15 million people in England and Wales, almost three-quarters of whom are women. In March 2001 the LGA reported in *Opportunity to prosper beyond the New Deal* that the recent government initiatives seeking to raise local employment and skill levels had focused on the employment service, private employment agencies and voluntary sector groups to the exclusion of local government. However joint work between the Department for Work and Pensions and the LGA is seeking to rectify this, as testified by the recent Accord between the LGA and JobCentrePlus. The Accord pledges local authorities to using JobCentrePlus as the "recruitment agency of choice", and to work jointly to develop a public sector ‘routeway’ into employment whereby unemployed people can obtain work experience and waged work in local authorities.

A wide range of actions are being taken in local authorities, such as:

- recruiting from a wider range of people, including those who find it hardest to obtain a job;
- training local authority employees and expanding opportunities for lifelong learning;
- providing childcare and other forms of flexible and family-friendly employment; and
- promoting in-work benefits.

And that is without considering the range of other measures which will improve the general employment situation locally, such as improved public transport and job creation.

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**Camden council** has its own work-life balance scheme, which enables council employees to request flexible working. The council supports any initiatives to expand flexible and family-friendly employment practices, recognising that the ability to balance work and home is a crucial factor in helping vulnerable workers such as parents (particularly lone parents), people with chronic ill health or disability, carers and others to enter or stay in the work place.

**Local authorities and the delivery of services**

"Most local authority services and functions have an impact on children either directly or indirectly. Direct impacts relate to day-care, childminding, social services, education and youth services. Indirect impacts on the quality of children’s lives include housing, leisure, environmental health, planning and transport policies”.

Joint LGA, DTLR and Cabinet Office report *Making a difference; reducing red tape and bureaucracy in local government 2002*

Almost every local authority service impacts on the lives of children and can have a positive effect on the quality of life of the poorest children. Key services such as education, social services, housing, local employment and regeneration initiatives, transport and leisure services have a role and responsibility to help families out of poverty and curb the cycle of deprivation.

Although much service provision is the direct responsibility of local councils, local services are best planned in partnership with those who live and work within local communities and in many cases by contracting others to deliver the services on behalf of the community. This approach is embedded into local authority practice by the Best Value regime.
The Treasury’s 2001 report *Tackling child poverty: giving every child the best possible start in life* highlights the need to harness the power and expertise of the voluntary and community sectors providing support for innovation and good practice. This is an issue that local authorities are very much engaged with, and not just in terms of improving service provision, but also as part of the community leadership role in reaching and empowering local communities.

There is currently much innovation in service provision, most of which involves partnerships approaches, where planning does not take place from the point of view of a single monolithic service provider, but from the point of view of the needs of the community and individuals within that community.

**Serving children well: a partnership model for children’s services**

An important element of the work that targets vulnerable children is ‘serving children well’ a project led by the LGA in partnership with ADSS (the Association of Directors of Social Services), the NHS Confederation, the Association of Chief Education Officers, the Confederation of Education Service Managers, and the IDeA (Improvement and Development Agency). Serving Children Well is a new model for delivering joined-up services to all children. It proposes giving local areas the discretion to plan and co-ordinate services locally, building on and extending partnership arrangements. Fundamental to the model is the involvement of children, their families and the wider community in identifying problems, setting priorities, finding solutions, and determining the style and delivery of services.

Currently 36 Serving Children Well pathfinders are piloting the approach, and a dedicated IDeA website has been established to allow the pathfinder authorities the opportunity to discuss progress. Evaluation is attempting to focus on the outcomes for children and their families.

The partners are using an approach which draws on the outcomes framework being developed by the Children and Young Peoples Unit. This involves five themes of social engagement: material wellbeing, staying safe, health and emotional wellbeing and fulfillment. Manchester’s Serving Children Well pathfinder is developing an action plan particularly aimed at improving outcomes for children’s material deprivation.

The Serving Children Well model is entirely compatible with Children’s Trusts, and indeed ten of the LGA pathfinders have recently been accepted as Children’s Trust pilots.

The LGA is delighted that the government has appointed a Minister for Children, and the green paper on children offers an opportunity to focus on the wide range of needs of disadvantaged children, but in the context of the needs of all children.

**Extended schools**

From summer 2001 the LGA worked on a two year project known as ‘Schools for the Community’, as part of the LGA’s six commitments work. It supported schools to play a fuller role in their local communities by developing school facilities and activities which would both tackle immediate social exclusion and raise achievement, thus helping prevent future social exclusion. Seven authorities were chosen as LGA pilots: Durham, Gateshead, Lincolnshire, Newcastle, Sefton, Tameside and Warwickshire, all having significant pockets of deprivation, poor health, inter-generational under-achievement, poverty of aspiration, and low levels of adult literacy and numeracy. Some were able to demonstrate a strong correlation between statistics of deprivation and pupil performance.

The range of services provided in the schools ranged from broad health services, financial services, housing and general advice, leisure and cultural projects; to family support - not to
mention those activities more usually associated with schools, such as breakfast clubs, homework clubs and classes for parents.

We are extremely pleased that the LGA project was such a success that it has now been included in the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) ‘extended schools’ programme whereby all local education authorities (LEAs) will be funded by 2005/6 to have at least one extended school.

The shared priorities for public services

The Serving Children Well project and the Schools for the Community project illustrate quite clearly that central government programmes are learning from and building on local government experience. This approach is fundamental to taking forward the shared priorities that the LGA and central government have agreed for public services. It is not just the shared priority which addresses quality of life for children and families which is relevant to child poverty - all of the other six shared priorities which have a role to play in the eradication of child poverty:

- promoting healthier communities and narrowing health inequalities;
- promoting the economic vitality of the localities;
- meeting local transport needs more effectively;
- transforming our local environment;
- creating safer and stronger communities; and
- raising standards across our schools.

It is important that the effects of reducing child poverty are considered in the joint work which is being undertaken on each of these priorities. Certainly at local authority level these links are clearly shown by the range of projects being supported, especially in those authorities with access to area-based initiative funds.

Hartlepool has a strong tradition of social inclusion work with a variety of regeneration schemes including New Deal for Communities, SRB funding, City Challenge, Neighbourhood Renewal Funds and Sure Start. The raft of resulting projects tackle employment opportunities and the access to jobs, increasing educational attainment, improving health, environmental and housing improvement, community safety initiatives and a range of community support and development schemes in the most deprived areas. Its local Public Service Agreement has children as a key theme, aiming to reduce infant mortality. There is also a Children’s Fund strategy led by the local authority but with its projects run by the voluntary sector. All these initiatives are being delivered in the context of a strong Local Strategic Partnership and the well developed Community Strategy.

The LGA believes that the work to be carried out under the shared priorities for public services programme can play an important role in developing approaches to tackle child poverty.
section two: how local authorities are tackling child poverty

The LGA published *Local inclusion: case studies of the local government role in promoting social justice and social inclusion* in 1999. At that time 140 local authorities in England and Wales had anti-poverty strategies. Already a broad definition of poverty was informing that work with consideration for those who lacked the material, social and cultural resources to participate fully in the life of the community. In addition, as many as 121 were already involved in at least one area-based initiative; then Education Action Zones, Health Action Zones, Employment Zones, New Deal for Communities pathfinders, and Sure Start trailblazers. Less than two years later, with the LGA’s publication of *All together Now: a survey of local authorities’ approaches to social inclusion and anti-poverty*, nearly three-fifths of all local authorities had established or were working on social inclusion/anti-poverty strategies, and three quarters had social inclusion as an agreed corporate priority. Many authorities have developed action plans to deliver such strategies.

Some of the initiatives which have been promoted as part of social inclusion strategies have been specifically aimed at families with children, whereas others have improved the lives of children as members of the wider community.

Suffolk County Council has had an anti-poverty strategy and action plan since 1994. Its second edition in 1996 involved a range of partners. This covered a wide range of initiatives, including a profile report mapping poverty in Suffolk, events to make services more accessible, an Anti-poverty Initiatives Fund for the voluntary sector (£30,000), a discount card for services, a code of practice on debt collection, joint working with health agencies, a library link project and a benefit take-up campaign. The anti-poverty strategy became the Social Inclusion Strategy and in 2001 was amalgamated with the Diversity Action Plan to produce a ‘Diversity and Inclusion Plan’ which is reviewed and updated twice a year. The Initiatives Fund is £100,000.

In April 2003, Harlow District Council adopted a social inclusion strategy to ensure that it has the necessary structures in place to drive the social inclusion agenda effectively. Its framework draws on the work undertaken by the Local Authority Social Exclusion network of which Harlow is a founding member. It ensures that the needs of hard-to-reach families are addressed, and its ultimate aim is to ensure that everyone who lives and works in Harlow has an equal opportunity to take advantage of the things that most consider a normal part of life. All committee reports have to state the implications for anti-poverty and a corporate charging policy ensures that concessions are targeted appropriately. The council also has a whole raft of initiatives contributing to the reduction of child poverty, including:

- the Young People’s Information Centre, offering a wide range of advice and counselling to young people aged 13-25 (including matters of sexual health, problems relating to the abuse of drugs and alcohol, smoking cessation, benefits and welfare rights, training and careers, housing and homelessness and free childcare) and resourcing of the local Youth Council to enable young people to participate in decision-making;

- childcare and support to families (including subsidised pre-school combined nursery and daycare provision, subsidised after-school and school holiday childcare, a resource centre for families with a child with disabilities; a ‘Gateway to Childcare’ scheme targeting socially excluded families; a range of parenting workshops and free vocational courses, with childcare and transport provided and targeted at women wishing to return to paid employment);

- a range of free or highly subsidised leisure activities for children and families, eg sports provision, play activities, paddling pools, a skate park; and
The government’s fifth annual report on poverty and social exclusion stated in 2003 that poverty in the UK is being tackled by:

- making work possible;
- providing financial security and inclusion;
- breaking cycles of deprivation; and
- improving public services for all.

Local authorities are playing a role in all of these. As illustrated by the work on children’s services and extended schools, local government has a long tradition of partnership working and delivery on national programmes, adding local value, local knowledge, resources and democratic accountability, and thus tailoring national schemes to fit local needs and circumstances. This crucial role in ensuring that central government initiatives translate from the theoretical into local services has perhaps been downplayed in the past. The cooperation and participation of local authorities is necessary to ensure that the Opportunity of All agenda can happen.

Opportunity for all: making work possible

Employment is clearly one of the routes out of poverty, although by no means all poor children live in workless households. Two years ago the LGA set up Helping the hardest to reach into work, another of the LGA’s six commitments projects. It aimed to reduce poverty and encourage social inclusion through the use of innovative approaches by supporting workless people into jobs. Improving both employability of local people and the employment opportunities within the area is a continuing priority for local councils, as it is for central government. The project gave the pathfinder councils the freedom to develop flexible and effective local employment and training schemes, individually tailored to help those facing the greatest barriers to finding work, for example using welfare budgets for transitional employment projects.

Nottinghamshire County Council, first an LGA six commitments pathfinder and now a Beacon Council for ‘Removing Barriers to Work’ sought to build on their already very successful transitional employment programme by focusing on the use and recycling of welfare payments to fund and enhance intermediate labour markets and other transitional employment schemes which may ostensibly be expensive but which are proven to have good job outcomes.

The ‘helping the hardest to reach into work’ project has provided a basis for the on-going work of a larger group of authorities (approximately 50) that have agreed local public service agreement (PSA) targets on tackling employment rates. There will now be an examination of whether the freedoms and flexibilities negotiated by the local PSA authorities on employment should be extended to other authorities.
The LGA and its pathfinder councils have worked closely with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and JobCentrePlus (JCP) to develop a Partnership Accord to further improve future local collaboration. Joint work includes looking at ways of boosting the effectiveness of local neighbourhood renewal strategies in raising employment levels in deprived areas. Training and improving basic skills levels is an objective which also occurs in many programmes under the other ‘opportunity for all’ themes.

**Bristol City Council** in effect extended the government’s New Deal by offering the same type of service to those not then eligible for the New Deal (lone parents, people with disabilities, offenders awaiting release and other non-eligible job seekers). The project exceeded its 2000-02 target of assisting 700 by helping 884 people. Now the **Pathways to work programme 2002-04** has a target of 800 clients drawn from across Bristol and south Gloucestershire.

The availability of affordable, quality **childcare** is a huge barrier for many job seekers, particularly lone parents, and local authorities play a key role in developing local strategies on childcare provision.

**Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council**, already a Beacon Council for ‘Removing Barriers to Work’ has made an SRB6 funding bid for childcare costs for lone parents in order to cover the period before the childcare element of the working tax credit is actually paid. This application follows discussion with JobCentrePlus, lone parent advisers and agencies working with lone parents.

**Transport** clearly has a role to play in helping parents get to work. Indeed public transport is vital for children and families to be able to take advantage of all services - education, training, lifelong learning, health and play facilities etc.

Local government has a leading role, often as an advocate on behalf of local communities to move this agenda forward. Some authorities have now established their own school bus fleets which are used for community transport needs when not in use for the school run.

The LGA published in September 2003 **Children on the move - accessing excellence** which outlines a series of recommendations for central government, local education authorities and schools to encourage improvements in home to school transport.

**North Warwickshire Borough Council** and partners are working with businesses to help them formulate travel plans to enable local people to take up suitable jobs. A new bus route has been introduced by **Warwickshire County Council** to serve those in a rural area who were having difficulty travelling to work at one of the large local employers.

**Opportunity for all: providing financial security and inclusion**

Central government has the responsibility of ensuring that the benefits and tax credit system adequately provides for the needs of families. What local government can do is work to improve the take-up of those benefits and tax credits both for those unable to work and those in work. Indeed **benefits take-up work** formed a key plank of many early local authority anti-poverty strategies, and there is an ever-growing wealth of experience amongst local authorities.

The LGA is contributing to this strand of work with its **quids for kids** campaign. On 7 April 2003 the LGA launched this year-long campaign to promote benefits and tax credit take-up for children in England and Wales with the publication of a good practice guide and an electronic toolkit. The LGA is in discussion with central government on some of the strategic issues which have arisen from **quids for kids**, such as:
• evaluation of different take-up methodologies;
• better use of existing data sources held locally and nationally;
• better statistics on awards and take-up rates, and other methodologies to understand non-take-up at local level and amongst particular groups (for example black and minority ethnic communities);
• capacity building in the advice sector to enable take-up work to be done; and
• more incentives for local authorities to carry out take-up work.

Local authorities are the biggest funders, and often a direct provider, of local advice services which contribute not only to take-up work, but also to social justice and financial inclusion. Local authorities are key members of the Community Legal Service (CLS) partnerships, and welcome the forthcoming review of CLS as an opportunity to raise concerns about unmet need for advice provision.

The LGA remains unconvinced by the ability of the social fund to fulfil the needs of our poorest families and we are undertaking research in 2003/4 to further probe the experience of social services departments.

Housing benefit provides poorer households with a safety net aimed at preventing homelessness, and the current proposals to remove housing benefit from households with anti-social behaviour are extremely unhelpful and will serve to exacerbate child poverty and social exclusion.

As administrators of housing and council tax benefit, local authorities have faced a wide range of challenges over the past year. In particular the effect of the new tax credits was difficult despite the work of the LGA with the Inland Revenue and the Department for Work and Pensions. The LGA welcomes reform and simplification of the housing benefit system, and we are working with the local authority pathfinders charged with advancing reform to ensure that the new system is fully evaluated before it is further implemented.

Another direct way in which local authorities can contribute to support for those on low incomes is through discount schemes. Such schemes typically apply to leisure facilities and travel, but can range across a wide variety of services, such as the Dacorum card introduced by Dacorum Borough Council which gives discounts at over 180 local business and facilities.

The scale of the problem of financial exclusion - the inability to access financial services, ranging across areas such as simple access to cash, current and savings accounts, credit, insurance and financial advice - is great, and the LGA welcomes the interest of the government in promoting financial inclusion. The LGA has signed up to the Debt on the Doorstep initiative; this national network of over 150 organisations came together to campaign to relieve the burden of debt on low income households and develop solutions to the problem of financial exclusion within the UK, and was launched at the House of Commons in April 2000.

A number of local authorities have facilitated Credit Unions - some for many years such as Leeds City Council and others set up more recently, ranging from the multi-cultural London Borough of Newham to the rural South Norfolk District Council. Some local authorities are seeing financial inclusion as part of the anti-poverty agenda and are attempting to develop a wider range of solutions.

There is also a need for better enforcement of the National Minimum Wage, as illustrated by Leicester’s Highfields two-year project in a recent Low Pay Commission report. In its first year, £47,000 of unpaid wages were recovered for workers.
Opportunity for all: breaking cycles of deprivation

Although this section looks at a number of service areas, many local authorities have already developed strategies across services considering the needs of children in a holistic way and which straddle more than one 'opportunity for all' theme.

Education

“The class gap is profound ... poor children are still one-third less likely to get five good GCSEs as their wealthier classmates; young people from unskilled backgrounds are over five times less likely to enter higher education that those from professional families.”

David Miliband MP, Minister for Education, 2003

Improving the educational achievement of young people from poor families is clearly crucial not only to their chances of lifting themselves out of poverty but also of preventing their children being poor. While improving the education standards of all children is important, concentrating on those children from disadvantaged families serves a dual purpose. This government has targeted some education programmes in the poorest areas, such as Education Action Zones and Excellence in Cities. Standards Fund money, representing 10 per cent of school’s budgets, is strongly linked to deprivation. There is emerging evidence that these programmes may be beginning to make a difference and that this is most likely to be the case for locally-led approaches which reflect the different circumstances in different areas.

To reduce the link between poverty and achievement, a more holistic approach needs to be taken to tackling children’s issues. The LGA believes that this can best be done by those at local level, using a multi-agency approach. The local education authority (LEA) is well placed to integrate education with other services to local communities. There are a number of key challenges which need to be addressed, including:

• the relative under-performance of young people in different racial and faith groups;
• demotivation of children in years seven and eight who are not engaged by their first years in secondary school and suffer educationally as a result; and
• the continuing difficulties over behaviour and attendance, and how LEAs support schools and pupil referral units to ensure inclusive education.
Effective strategies to tackle these issues often involve action in more than one school as well as integration with broader local social and economic policies, delivered by the local authority and other LSP partners. Some of the success stories include:

- **Birmingham's** placing of education support officers in temporary accommodation;
- **Dorset's** small schools support strategy;
- **Lincolnshire's** rural academy which integrates eight senior schools, a primary school and a special school; and
- **Derbyshire's** community education project.

Coleshill Heath School in **Solihull** is located on a disadvantaged public housing estate. Despite numerous difficulties, the head teacher working with the new unitary local authority was able to deliver high standards of education for groups of children that needed it most. Key elements were:

- housing policy leading to a more balanced allocation of families to the estate;
- the introduction of family literacy and basic skills programmes through the school and the local further education college;
- the employment of a special support manager for children and families in crisis;
- the provision of high-quality support for children with special needs and those at risk of becoming truants;
- support for the school from wider community services including the police, local GPs and the health authority; and
- the introduction of new extra-curricular activities - sports, music and drama.

The partnership between school and local authority resulted in improved attainment, a reduction in truancy, more pupils on the roll and greater involvement by parents in the life of the school.

**Early years and Sure Start**

Work with pre-school children and their families is crucial if poor children are not to begin school already at a disadvantage. The LGA is pleased to acknowledge the significant increase in government investment in early years education over the last few years, especially in deprived areas. We believe that likewise the government has acknowledged that local authorities have been central to transforming this funding into local projects which make a difference.

**London Borough of Hillingdon** early years service provides not only information on the full range of childcare and other community services available to pre-school children and their families, but also subsidy for childcare and parenting support where it is needed. Services signposted include toy libraries; parent and toddler groups; lone parent advisors in the JobCentrePlus who can give advice regarding training courses, employment and financial support for childcare; basic skills training for parents; women’s projects; Homestart; out of school provision for school-aged children; and Sure Start in Townfield. The Sure Start team provides many of those services already mentioned, and includes a range of support and training for parents with a crèche supplied, as well as activities for children and parents together. A smoking cessation clinic is also being established. The involvement of the social services Children With Disabilities team in the early years work has ensured that special needs are being addressed.

The **Portsmouth Network** provides a similar range of activities and services for families with children aged 0-14, some at early years rooms attached to a primary school. As well as ‘good grub’ workshops, the healthy eating message is integrated into breakfast clubs and after-school clubs with a range of activities, including cooking, tasting, self-awareness, and gardening.
The initial experience of Sure Start showed that services did need more co-ordination and more coherent streams of funding, and the LGA welcomes the response of the government to date in improving this. Bringing together the Sure Start projects with other early years and childcare initiatives into one government unit was a good start. We applaud the fact that from April 2004 more Sure Start funding will go to local authorities, with less ring-fencing, enabling better integration of early years and childcare services. The LGA has also been lobbying for the replacement of the Early Years Development Plan by auditing early years work through other existing planning mechanisms such as the Community Strategy or Education Development Plan: this is now being actively considered by the Sure Start Unit.

Many local authorities will now be playing the same role in the development of children’s centres. Furthermore, local authorities are the key to ensuring that such projects do not exist in isolation, but are part of a strategic approach to tackling child poverty which involves other partners.

The local education authority is taking the lead on children’s centres in the City of Stoke on Trent with a target of one centre in every one of its seventeen deprived wards. It is also the local authority which has taken the lead on moving children’s services up the agenda through the Children and Young Peoples Strategic Partnership, the creation of a Children’s Commissioner, and a Children and Young Peoples Board chaired by the council manager. There is a social inclusion officer within the social services department who is a member of the regional social inclusion group facilitated by West Midlands Local Government Association. The Stoke Local Strategic Partnership will be monitoring child poverty as part of evaluating its community strategy theme of a ‘healthy city’.

Services for 5-13 year olds

Local authorities have similarly played a role in setting up Children’s Fund and Cymorth projects targeted at services for 5-13 year olds who are showing signs of difficulties.

A partnership approach in Dartford and Gravesham has led to a range of projects: ‘don’t sit, get fit’; ‘feel-good groups’, ‘Earthworms’ (an educational programme to give disadvantaged children the opportunity to learn about the environment), ‘Stress Crew’ and after-school groups for children with significant behavioural difficulties.

Bedfordshire Libraries’ homework centres are open for two evenings a week staffed by a homework centre organiser, supported by library staff. It targets 8-13 year olds needing help with homework. The homework centre staff encourage children to make the best use of the resources - whether books, extensive ICT or helping each other. The first two homework centres, launched in 2001, have proved so successful that they are now funded permanently and two more have opened recently.

Young people

Local authorities have a range of services aimed at young people, which tend to have a dual role. They provide activities in deprived areas at little or no cost, and access to support which enables young people to recognise that there are opportunities for them to get involved and achieve their personal ambitions. Similar projects are often initiated from different origins - from crime prevention, health inequalities and improving employability to reducing drug use. For example, London Borough of Southwark’s Kickstart scheme was started to help tackle youth crime on its housing estates; yet its wide range of sport, recreational and educational activities for 8-18 year-olds is familiar to planners working from a general social inclusion or neighbourhood renewal perspective.
With the level of teenage pregnancy in the UK higher than any other European country, local authorities are involved - usually with partners - to reduce this level or to support young parents so that they and their babies are not disadvantaged, for example by:

- improved awareness of sexual health and relationship issues;
- advice and support;
- initiatives to help school-age mothers back into education and employment; and
- supported housing projects for pregnant girls and young mothers.

Domestic violence

Given that domestic violence accounts for a quarter of all recorded crime in England and Wales, we welcome its inclusion as part of the government’s family policy initiative. We recognise that domestic violence can be experienced by people from different social classes. However it is often linked to wider family problems and can have serious and long-lasting consequences, including poverty for mothers who leave the family home. We welcome the Home Office’s funding to develop a local co-ordination infrastructure to tackle domestic violence, and the LGA’s role in this development. We are pleased that an interdepartmental review is also considering future funding of all forms of supported housing, including refuges for women and children fleeing domestic violence.

Opportunity for all: tackling inequalities by improving public services for all

Securing improvement in local services through managing performance and community leadership is a key priority for councils, and much effort is being made to achieve this. The LGA similarly has a clear commitment to work to improve public services by influencing both central government policy and local government practice.
Local Public Service Agreements provide a focus on priorities for improvement. In order to secure greater buy in by public sector partners to national and local priorities, the LGA has proposed that Local Strategic Partnerships should be more involved in the next round of LPSAs. This would mean that all the major players in the locality agree to the LPSA targets, contribute to their delivery and share rewards for success.

The comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) can also help focus efforts and resources on what needs to change. CPA complements other methods of improving outcomes such as the Best Value regime and in future Best Value reviews will concentrate on areas of weakness identified by the CPA. Local Strategic Partnerships also have an important role to play in improving services. Unless we have a multi-agency endeavour to join up and improve services, we cannot hope to break the cycle of deprivation that is a key element of child poverty.

**Access to services**

Access to services is being tackled by local authorities in a variety of means, not just by improved information. The role of transport in tackling social inclusion has been covered in depth by the Social Exclusion Unit in the report earlier this year *Making the connections: final report on transport and social exclusion*. This report includes thirty-eight case studies, over half of which have the local authority as the key contact. The particular situation of rural families is one which the LGA has been highlighting in a number of ways, currently including (in 2003) the provision of childcare.

**Liverpool City Council**, a Beacon Council for Social Inclusion through ICT, has been involved in a number of projects to improve electronic access to services for residents at the same time as raising the level of computer usage in deprived areas. One current project is built on a successful model used to engage 3,000 people in Dingle in Health initiatives. It aims to engage 3,600 people by recruiting and training 100 volunteers to act as intermediaries between service providers and their neighbourhood or community network. The volunteers will be rewarded with a computer, and the recruited households supported in the use of interactive learning. This will be complemented by the promotion of electronic delivery by public services. This pilot will then look at whether the household’s situation has improved as a result with particular emphasis on jobs, housing and e-democracy and housing.

A one-stop shop has been sited in a very deprived ward of **Oadby and Wigston Borough Council**. Advice and information on any topic is given to residents - the highest percentage of enquiries are about welfare benefits. Funding for this project has been provided by the local authority, local business, welfare funds, National Lottery, Rotary Club and the Police Fund amongst others, but raising funding has been extremely time-consuming for the project’s workers. 22,000 people have used the centre over the last five years, which was commended by the Best Value Inspectors. Support for the one-stop shop is a core part of this local authority’s anti-poverty strategy and the model is being replicated in another part of the borough.

**Health inequalities**

We welcome the Department of Health’s recent publication: *Tackling health inequalities: a programme for action*. This report includes a number of examples of work involving local authorities; such as Kingston Upon Hull’s reduction of child pedestrian casualties.
Many of the other projects mentioned in other sections of this paper will also have an effect on health inequalities; for example, sports promotion, teenage pregnancy work and Sure Start. Furthermore the new power of health scrutiny means that local councillors have another route for improving health services in the community.

Lack of money, inadequate shopping facilities, conflicting information about food and health and poor transport mean that many people are denied healthy food choices - this has become known as food poverty.

Newham Food Access Partnership (NFAP) is a borough-wide umbrella group with twenty-two members from statutory, voluntary and community sectors. NFAP seeks to alleviate food poverty and encourage healthy eating, and aims to increase consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables by families low incomes. This involves improving the supply of quality fresh fruit and vegetables to communities in deprived areas at affordable prices, developing food projects in schools, raising awareness of healthy eating message (in particular the five-a-day initiative), and increasing knowledge and skills. The council seeks to ensure that all projects are community-led and that sustainable projects are created by developing joint funding bids. Projects include:

- fruit tuck shops in schools;
- free home delivery service for those who may have particular trouble shopping, including mothers in advanced pregnancy; and
- breakfast clubs to provide students with a nutritious meal before the start of the school day.

Housing is clearly another area which impacts on both the health and general well-being of children in poverty. Good practice of local authorities in both tackling homelessness and tackling fuel poverty has been recognised by the Beacon Councils scheme.

The LGA is pleased that the government has issued guidance to authorities to ensure that children in temporary accommodation get access to regular health checks. Many authorities are working constructively with other agencies to ensure children are not disadvantaged by the place that they live in. Authorities are committed to reaching the Decent Home Standard and the LGA welcomes the initiatives in the housing bill that aim to help local authorities regulate conditions in the private sector.

Kerrier District Council is one of a number of partners involved in a health action zone scheme called ‘a breath of fresh air’ which is examining the link between asthma and poor housing.

Cultural and leisure services

There has long been a recognition by local authorities that cultural and leisure services can play an important role in tackling poverty, social exclusion and health inequalities as well as improving the quality of life in our local communities. Such services include arts, heritage, libraries, information technology, parks and open spaces, play and sport. In a number of local councils, cultural service departments are working with partners to develop healthy living centres and promote diversion from crime. There is a long tradition of councils providing non-stigmatising discount leisure schemes for those experiencing poverty. Oxford City Council has used data from housing benefit records to promote the council’s Bonus Slice leisure discount card as well as tax credits.
Prominence is being given in many places to this social inclusion role, as illustrated by Leeds City Council using its local PSA to promote sport participation amongst young people in their most deprived wards, both in schools and in the wider community. In the summer of 2003, free swimming was provided in a number of places, most notably across Wales. Hull City Council have provided this for some years. Other local authorities have targeted their resources to providing free transport to subsidised activities or to providing free swimming to schools in deprived areas.

**North Cornwall District Council** leisure services has a number of initiatives which contribute to the social inclusion agenda:

- many free events in different communities and schools, ranging from playdays to sports taster sessions to a disability awareness day and a sports festival;
- outreach activities for rurally excluded children (through the provision of free transport to a centre or by taking activities into the community);
- family learning weekends; and
- Flashpoint safety centre who delivered life skills to over 2000 children per year.

Some activities for children are run alongside support for unemployed parents to obtain training and jobs. This programme of work will be extended as funding has been secured through the Active Communities Development Fund to deliver a five-year project aimed at children and families who are socially excluded.

Arts and libraries also have a contribution to make, the latter being recognised by the round three Beacon awards.

**Wrexham Arts Agency** was established in July 1999, initially as a three year project, to deliver a programme of arts-based activities to young people throughout the county borough with a link to the borough’s corporate strategy. The Arts Agency has run fifty-three residency, training and partnership projects involving 10,500 residents, and provided advisory and consultancy support. Skills being developed include not only creative skills, but also communication skills, team leadership and confidence building, numeracy, literacy and ICT through a programme of drama and scripted animation projects.

**Child poverty in black and minority ethnic communities**

The government is well aware that research has shown that different black and minority ethnic groups within the UK suffer different levels of poverty and deprivation, for example Pakistani and Bangladeshi families experience higher levels of unfit housing, poor health and greater poverty when in work than even jobless white households. Furthermore joblessness is a key factor with a difference of 17 percentage points between the average UK employment rate and those of black and minority ethnic people. Other factors include family size, language barriers, and educational achievement as well as racism and discrimination. The problem of schools and their exclusions of black boys has been identified, and a number of initiatives are currently under way to address the issue, often as part of a wider community cohesion or other strategy to engage young black people in a variety of ways, including through sport and other leisure activities. For example, Gloucester City Council supports Conscious, a football project with police and African-Caribbean youth.

**Tackling pockets of deprivation**

The government’s neighbourhood renewal strategy with its aim to tackle “postcode poverty” has been underpinned by the welcome investment of £900 million over three years for 88 of the most
deprived local authority areas. However the area-based approach has also been much criticised by many - including local authorities - for ignoring the poverty of those who do not live within large areas of deprivation. In July 2003, the LGA published a paper on tackling pockets of deprivation with examples of local authority activity in those areas without access to additional funding, and found that there is no shortage of ideas nor willing partners to work with. However funding for such initiatives is precarious, and full funding from a local authority source requires very difficult decisions to be made. Additional central government resources would allow these sort of initiatives to become more widespread.

**Bridgnorth** established a parent support group for pre-school children in isolated families, and a Wheels 2 Work project to enable young people.

**East Cambridgeshire** set up a network of IT provision and training in small villages.

**Hambleton District Council’s** Flying Start scheme provides support in the summer holidays to children who need help when moving up to middle school.

**Mid-Suffolk District Council** set up a project to provide child safety equipment, such as stair gates and fire guards, to parents on benefits in rural areas.

**Powys County Council** set up a home-visiting welfare rights service to increase benefits take-up.

**Test Valley Borough Council with Winchester Health Care Trust** and the Youth Service started a Sex Care on Saturday clinic for young people.

**Tewkesbury Borough Council** supported a furniture recycling project.
Local government has a unique role to play in the eradication of child poverty. The LGA would wish to see the government’s current cross-cutting review giving formal recognition of the community leadership role that local government plays as well as its role as a key employer and service deliverer. However alongside that recognition, there needs to be a strategy to ensure that this role is adequately resourced and supported by central government. The sustainability of area-based initiatives is of crucial concern to the LGA and local authorities.

Collaboration over the past few years between the LGA and central government is proceeding in the right direction on issues raised by local authorities. We continue to work together to achieve:

- better and more timely data: knowing who is poor and where they are clearly affects the design of solutions;
- better and wider dissemination of good practice and what works;
- more co-ordination between national, regional and local strategies;
- further progress on consolidating funding streams; and
- a continued expansion of funding, for example for Sure Start and children’s centres.

The LGA welcomes the 2003 UK National Action Plan on Social Inclusion and in particular the commitment of the DWP to co-ordinate follow-up action to ensure progress is made. There will also be benefits to comparing action in each of the countries of the United Kingdom, for example with the work of the Child Poverty Task Group in Wales.

The approach to developing the evidence base and building capacity in the government’s programme for action for Tackling Health Inequalities could be usefully applied to the child poverty pledge. Given that the pledge is a long-term objective and that some of today’s initiatives may only reap measurable dividends with the next generation, this does pose problems for local authorities and others wanting to invest in approaches that will produce real positive and demonstrable outcomes for children. It also provides a challenge to decision-makers in local and central government charged with working out where limited resources are most effectively targeted in order to achieve the 2010 and 2020 targets.

The LGA is pleased to be agreeing an accord with the DWP and the Treasury for joint work on child poverty, and believe this should provide a forum in which some of these difficult questions can be addressed and we hope resolved.

Local Government Association
September 2003
some useful resources

LGA publications

These can be found on www.lga.gov.uk or from LGConnect on 020 7664 3131

Children on the move - accessing excellence; the future of school travel, LGA, September 2003

Tackling pockets of deprivation: lessons from local authorities’ social inclusion work, LGA, July 2003

Quids for kids: a good practice guide on benefits and tax credits take-up work for families with children, LGA, April 2003 (this is accompanied by an electronic tool-kit and campaign newsletters in 2003/04 on www.lga.gov.uk/quidsforkids.asp)

Community cohesion, LGA joint guidance with ODPM, Home Office, CRE and Inter-Faith Network. December 2002 (with accompanying good practice examples on the LGA website)

Serving children well: a new vision for children’s services, LGA/NHS Confederation/ADSS, August 2002. (the LGA website also provides information on delivering the serving children well vision)

Changing credit unions, paying dividends in community finance, LGA, November 2001

Tackling poverty and social inclusion through cultural services: a toolkit for local authorities, LGA, October 2001

Value of parks and open space: social inclusion and community regeneration, LGA, December 2001

All together now: a survey of local authorities’ approaches to social inclusion and anti-poverty, LGA, April 2001

Involving young people in decision making: a survey of local authorities, LGA, August 2001

Hear by right: setting standards for the active involvement of young people in democracy, LGA/NYA, July 2001 (this work is being further developed with the National Youth Agency - 0116 285 3700).

Other publications

Britain’s Poorest: Severe and persistent poverty and social exclusion, CRSP and Save the Children, September 2003

Agenda and poverty in Britain, Equal Opportunities Commission, September 2003

Local Authorities and Social Exclusion (LASE) Report 10: How Local Authorities can make a difference: Benchmarking Best Practice, LGIU and the Local Government Centre at Warwick University, July 2002 (this is the latest in a series of useful reports from the LASE Network: see www.lgiu.gov.uk)


Monitoring poverty and social exclusion, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and New Policy Institute, 2002

Opportunity for All: Fourth and Fifth Annual Reports, DWP, 2002 and September 2003

Preliminary conclusions: Measuring child poverty consultation, DWP, 2003

Social Exclusion (the role of legal and advice services in tackling social exclusion), Lord Chancellor’s Department, December 2001
Still Missing Out? Ending poverty and social exclusion: messages to government from families with disabled children, Barnardos, 2002

Tackling Child Poverty: giving every child the best possible start in life, Treasury, December 2001

Tackling disadvantage: a 20 year enterprise, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, January 2003
www.jrf.org.uk

Tackling Health Inequalities: a programme for action, Department for Health, 2003

UK National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2003-05; DWP, July 2003

Other websites

The Improvement and Development Agency www.idea.gov.uk for a range of good practice information and Beacon Council information; particularly relevant themes are removing barriers to work; social inclusion through ICT; tackling homelessness and tackling fuel poverty. IDeA, DfES and the LGA have launched an electronic toolkit on extended schools available on the IDeA Knowledge website as well as on Teachernet (www.teachernet.gov.uk).

Child Poverty Action Group www.cpag.org.uk

End Child Poverty Coalition www.ecp.org.uk

Community cohesion
www.communitycohesion.gov.uk
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