



Save the Children

# HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS

How families living in severe poverty engage with anti-poverty services

by Danny Phillips, Claire Telfer and Gill Scott

The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of how parents living in severe poverty in Scotland perceive services that are designed to support them and their families. As a result, it highlights the main factors that affect their use of such services and suggests a number of points for further consideration. It builds on previous research by Save the Children into the numbers and household characteristics of children in Scotland that live in severe poverty. The research explores in some depth the views of parents about the services and initiatives that are intended to support people living in poverty. Parents talked about services related to employment, training, advice, social work and health.

The findings show that the success of initiatives and services designed to support families in severe poverty is dependent upon the interaction of three main factors – family circumstances, the nature of service delivery and barriers to engagement with services, and economic and social factors that impact on local communities.

## KEY POINTS

- Parents felt that some of the services they encounter do not fully recognise the needs of parents coping on very low incomes and difficult circumstances. Perceptions of the relevance of public services are influenced by information from social and community networks, previous experiences of services, household composition, type of services available locally, and the stage in the life cycle of a family.
- Parents identified a number of complex and inter-related factors that act as barriers to service use. Positive experiences were reported but it was generally the case that when parents have engaged with services, such as the benefits agency, Jobcentre Plus and social work, they expressed concerns about them. The main barriers reported were that the agendas of services were not consistent with the reality of families lives; prior negative experiences with services or professionals; a lack of confidence in 'officialdom'; processes for accessing 'trusted' information and perceptions that services are badly joined up.
- Amongst the parents in this study, negative experiences were often reported for employment based services such as Jobcentre Plus. There was a belief that, despite professionals trying to respond to clients needs, public services in this sector are inflexible and providers do not understand the reality of families' lives or their long term aspirations and motivations.
- Parents often felt trapped in severe poverty. The range of services available was seen to offer little support for moving on and few long term benefits. However, national and local economic and social conditions were also identified as affecting their ability to overcome poverty. The real availability of jobs in local areas and the lack of a supportive community affect family wellbeing as much as any difficulty in accessing services.
- Parents felt that services should meet their long term as well as short and medium term needs. Community based services, sensitive to local economic and housing conditions and flexible enough to meet the complex needs of individual families were generally the preferred option.

# Background

Levels of severe child poverty in Scotland are a legitimate and significant concern. Save the Children's research estimates that 9% of Scottish children or 95 000 children are living in severe poverty in Scotland. Of particular concern is that the number of children living in severe poverty has remained constant, at between 8% and 9% between 2004/05 and 2007/08. Eradicating child poverty by 2020 is a UK wide legal requirement, for which the UK Government is responsible through the Child Poverty Act 2010. The Scottish Government is committed to doing all that it can to support this goal. The 2010 Act places a legal requirement on the Scottish Government (alongside the UK Government) to produce a strategy setting out how it will contribute to meeting the targets, and ensure that no child suffers from socio-economic disadvantage. Tackling severe child poverty is vital if the 2020 target is to be met.

Efforts to reduce the impact of severe poverty on the lives of children and families must consider the effectiveness of public services in engaging families and meeting their needs. The research described in this report arose from the identification of a gap in knowledge concerning how parents living in severe poverty perceive and engage with services designed to support their families, engage them in the world of work and lift them out of poverty. This research addresses this gap by providing insights from parents themselves in order to better design and deliver services for the most vulnerable families.

The study used focus groups and interviews in six areas of Scotland to produce findings on how forty five families living on the lowest incomes are engaging with existing services and initiatives. The study focused on interventions designed to tackle worklessness and improve benefits uptake but also took into account other services that parents encounter.

The findings in this study add to the growing body of evidence about the relevance of services to families living in poverty. This research suggests that public services directed at reducing child poverty do not always resonate with the experience of families living with severe poverty. Reducing child poverty and improving the incomes of the poorest is a key theme in Scottish government policy but it is recognised that improving the long term well being of families struggling on very low incomes is not an easy task. The success of services designed to support their families, engage them in the world of work and lift them out of poverty is often constrained by a number of interrelated factors such as:

- Family circumstances
- Nature of service delivery
- Economic and social factors that impact on communities

# 1. Family circumstances

The circumstances in which parents might seek the support of public services directed at employability or the reduction of poverty and its impact were varied. Most of the parents involved in this research felt they were coping on very low incomes and with difficult circumstances. Pride in their ability to cope on a low income was evident and was one of the factors that affected whether parents were willing to seek assistance from public services. Although parents felt knowledgeable about services and benefits they felt that it was not useful to try to access such services that were not relevant to their own circumstances at this point in their family life cycle. They interpreted the lack of interest in their needs by services as occurring because they are neither so close to the labour market that they are ready to take on employment nor living with such a level of crisis that the state would want to intervene. This was particularly evident in relation to employment services. Respondents often had positive attitudes towards employment and training over the long term but felt their current circumstances and the difficulties of accessing sustainable work, and avoiding the attendant risks of recurrent poverty, were often not fully recognised by existing services. The result was that they did not engage with services. Public services were often seen as having neglected the interests of families coping with severe poverty in favour of other groups.

*“We seem to have the services to deal with the crisis, and we have the services that can assist people who are ‘ready to go’ back to work, it is the people in between who are difficult to deal with.”*

Parent perceptions of the right time for changing their family circumstances and entering training or employment varied. They were often fearful that public services would encourage change at the wrong time for them and their children leading to negative impacts. Parents tended to qualify their aspirational statements to take up work or training with reasons why they could not take up opportunities at the moment - ‘I will go back to work one day but when the children are older’. They often stated that they had to weigh up the full value of any job with an assessment of the risks. In short, parents had to decide if a job was ‘worth it’. First and foremost, parents expressed the assessment in financial terms with the security of the family home being the most important consideration.

Parents feared that their entitlement to Housing Benefit would not be enough to cover their rent when they started earning a wage. Secondly, assessments were also based on considerations about balancing work with caring responsibilities and the impact that entering work could have on their children.

*“Rent is a real issue if working. I will not risk my house. My daughter lives there and it is her home. I could not risk losing it, or having to move.”*

## Issues for further consideration

- **The research suggests that further work needs to be done to explore the role of the state in supporting families living in poverty when there is no ‘red or amber light’ signaling an immediate crisis. When supporting families living in poverty there appears to be a very real tension between appropriate early intervention and intrusion into people’s lives that needs to be understood in more depth.** As a starting point it would be useful to try and identify the characteristics of this group of parents who are ‘not in crisis, but not ready for change’ so that policy and services designed to support them can be tailored to their specific needs.
- **In terms of considering services aimed at supporting parents into work, it appears that further consideration should be given to adopting the principles and learning from programmes that parents have engaged with, such as Working for Families.**
- **The UK and Scottish Governments should work together to examine how best to further support families with the transition to work - from living on benefits to earning a wage.** The research suggests key issues are  
a) harmonising the working tax credits and benefit systems, as much as possible, so that people can move in and out of work without financial disruption and  
b) supporting families with the additional costs associated with employment e.g. childcare, clothes for work, transport.

## 2. Nature of service delivery

Previous studies of service use have suggested that individuals living in poverty find the experience of dealing with providers unpleasant or demeaning. This research found that it is more complex than that: although parents living in severe poverty who are coping appear to be unwilling to fully access services, when they did so the experience was not always a positive one. All of the parents who took part in this research had had some contact with public services in the previous two years. The concerns and barriers that prevent parents engaging with services that emerged from parents experiences included:

**i. A view that the agendas of services were not consistent with the reality of families lives.** Parents often felt that public services were working to a state led, 'box ticking' agenda. The picture is of a group of parents who are expected to discuss very personal information, admit failure and take significant risks with their families welfare, with a faceless bureaucracy that they are not convinced has their best interest at heart and which they hear often fails its clients.

*“You want to be treated like a person. Politeness, eye contact. They should seem like they are giving you some of their time. Benefits agencies generally do not care about peoples' situations, they're just ticking boxes.”*

**ii. A distrust of 'officialdom' generally.** Parents expressed a fear of the power that professionals in positions of authority had over them and parents often felt judged by service providers. Parents also expressed a lack of trust in the willingness of the benefits agency and Jobcentre Plus to provide full information about their entitlements and rights. However, parents spoke very positively about some professionals. Three groups were identified - health visitors and midwives; professionals working in community based organisations; and certain trusted individuals within statutory organisations. All of these groups were able to gain the trust of those they were working with and they were seen as flexible and responsive to the needs and aspirations of families.

*“We are all judged in the same way, you are just someone 'on benefits' regardless of why you are on it. People are not regarded properly.”*

**iii. The way information is gathered and processed by parents through their communities.**

A significant amount of information about services is received from within close-knit communities through word of mouth. Parents felt that this was the most trusted source of information. However, the professionals who took part in this research suggested that much information passed on through word of mouth was subjective and sometimes inaccurate, creating 'myths and legends' which could function as a barrier to engaging parents.

*“If it was a friend I wouldn't tell them to go to the Job Centre. I would say speak to someone who knows, who lives around here and they will tell you where to go or they could come here. I would tell them to come to this community project .”*

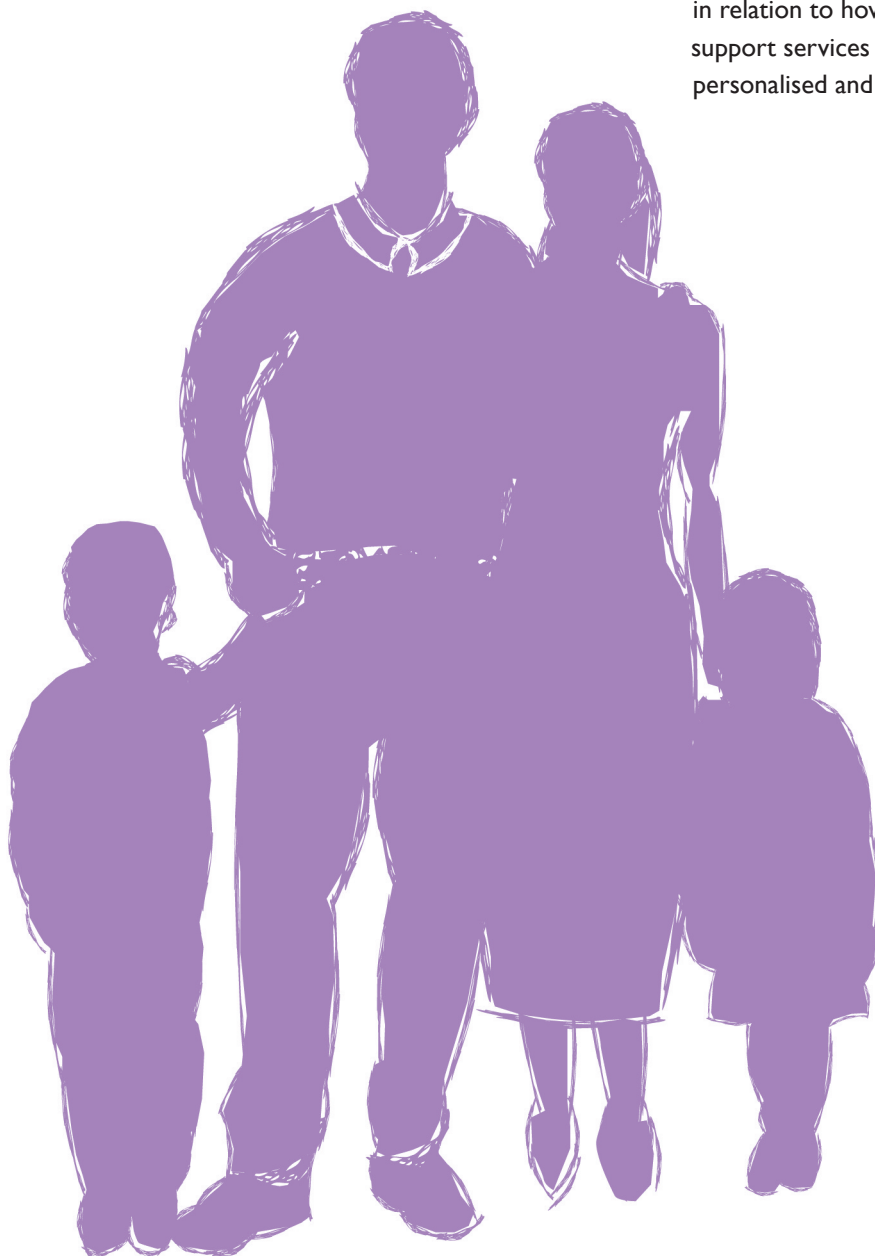
**iv. Services are frequently perceived to be poorly joined up and badly co-ordinated,** for example between telephone and face-to-face delivery. This often led parents to report poor customer service.

This study found that parents evaluate their experience of engaging with services by how they are treated – whether they know who they are talking to and whether they judged the professional dealing with them as competent – rather than based on the outcome of engaging with a particular service. Professionals tend to evaluate services in a different way, often leading to different assessment of the effectiveness of services. Parents did feel services could make a difference and were willing to make recommendations for changes that they felt could be implemented relatively easily. The first priority for most was the need to make services more flexible and more family friendly. Such change was seen as necessary to improve family well being and strengthen family life.

“It [engaging with services] needs to be worthwhile I need to know the [service] is also worth while, not money, but that they can really help. There needs to be a point or purpose to come. It doesn't have to be a financial reward. It just has to be worthwhile.”

## Issues for further consideration

- Local service providers and Community Planning Partnerships should consider how to ensure parents living in severe poverty can access good quality information and advice. The research highlighted a couple of areas that are worthy of further reflection a) maximising the use of 'trusted' individuals who work in the community and b) celebrating and communicating positive engagement with parents to help address mis-information.
- The findings suggest that further reflection is needed in relation to how employment, advice and other support services can be delivered in a more personalised and customer focused way.



### 3. Economic and social factors that impact on communities

Parents expressed a very clear view that escaping severe poverty was about much more than just engaging with services that are designed to support them. They identified a number of economic and social structural barriers that impact on local communities and prevent parents escaping poverty. Firstly, where actual opportunities for employment and the real availability of jobs were lacking, services that focus on employability seemed less relevant to parents.

**“We need more family friendly business especially in small to medium-sized employers. Many areas rely on these smaller employers but they have limited capacity to take up the slack if someone needs to be off work. These are real Scottish problems; in more rural areas it is hard to find jobs with good working conditions.”**

Secondly, the poorer the area the more likely parents were to feel the route out of poverty was difficult. This suggested that parents feel that, in the long term, services need to concentrate on area regeneration alongside employability to ensure that flexible, sustainable and well paid employment opportunities are available. Thirdly, social problems within some communities have a significant impact on family wellbeing and make it difficult for parents

to see beyond the immediate challenges facing them and their children. Parents referred to a number of social problems that affect their family’s wellbeing including young people with nothing to do, gang culture, antisocial behaviour, drug and alcohol abuse and crime.

**“There is nothing to do here and no jobs. All anyone does is drink. It is the only thing to do. All you do is have bairns and then regret you had so many bairns. There are no decent jobs so what are supposed to do?”**

#### Issues for further consideration

- The findings point to the need to consider how government and partners can support job creation, particularly in deprived communities and in relation to flexible and sustainable work opportunities for women and mothers. It may also be relevant to examine approaches that support employers to enable existing or newly created jobs to be more accessible to those furthest from the labour market.
- It appears important for government and partners to reflect on what more could be done to prioritise the regeneration of disadvantaged communities.

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The full report by Danny Phillips, Claire Telfer and Gill Scott is available at [www.savethechildren.org.uk](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk)  
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