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Education and Skills Committee

By email

22 March 2018

Poverty and attainment inquiry

Thank you for your email of 26 February 2018 inviting the Poverty and Inequality Commission to submit its views on tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment. The Commission has not examined this issue in detail, so this response is based on the consideration that was given to education as part of the Commission's advice to Scottish Ministers on the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan.

It is important that the Committee's inquiry takes account of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and the Scottish Government's first Child Poverty Delivery Plan. Evidence shows that children have worse cognitive development and schooling outcomes partly because of low income¹ and it is therefore crucial that continued efforts are made to reduce the numbers of children living in poverty.

The Commission's advice sets out actions that need to be taken in order to meet the statutory child poverty targets, as well as actions that deal with the consequences of living in poverty. The Commission expects that addressing barriers to education will be a key part of the Delivery Plan's actions to improve the quality of life, and future life chances, for children living in poverty. Action on education therefore needs to have a two pronged approach: raising educational attainment in order to reduce the likelihood of poverty in adulthood, and addressing the poverty-related barriers that prevent children from fully accessing education.

Raising educational attainment

In its advice the Commission welcomed the Scottish Government's commitment to, and investment in, closing the poverty related attainment gap. It is important that, in order to make a difference, funding should be explicitly directed towards the interventions which

¹ Kerris Cooper & Kitty Stewart, *Does Money Affect Children's Outcomes? An Update*, CASE/203 (Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, 2017) http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case/new/research/money_matters/report.asp

show the strongest evidence that they will make a difference. The Commission recommended in its advice that the Scottish Government should ensure that local authorities and schools have access to the best evidence about what works and that this informs the use of the attainment funding they receive. The impact of the £750m attainment funding should be monitored and evaluated. In order to drive good policy making it is important that the attainment gap should be measured in relation to family circumstance and not just on an area basis. This is especially important given that the majority of children in poverty do not live in deprived areas.

Given the gap that has already opened up between children from the most well off and the poorest households by the time they start school, stronger links should be made to the importance of quality in early learning and child care in order to close the attainment gap.

Analysis of data from the Growing Up in Scotland study suggests that children living in poverty value school as much as their better off peers but that parents living in poverty are less likely to believe that they can positively influence their child's achievement at school.² The Commission has heard examples where parents feel that teachers have assumed that pupils will either go on to low paid jobs or not work at all because they are living in poverty. It is important that schools listen to children and parents about the range of barriers that they face in fully taking part in education, which may not always be obvious to the school, and also about what they value and their aspirations. Unless schools engage with children and parents to understand their experiences then interventions to address poverty and attainment may not meet their needs.

Poverty related barriers to fully accessing education

Costs of the school day was an issue that was raised with the Commission as a high priority for those with experience of living in poverty. The costs associated with education can both increase the stress on families and impact on children's ability to fully engage with education. These include obvious costs like school uniform, school trips, book fairs and non-uniform days. The Commission also heard, however, about examples of other costs being shifted from schools to families, for example through expectations that all families will have access to a computer to carry out homework and a printer to be able to print out material that is a core part of learning. Pupils are not always able to access these resources in school if they do not have them at home.

School uniform and the school clothing grant were particularly highlighted as an issue to the Commission. Under the 1980 Education Act local authorities must make provision for school clothing for pupils who would otherwise not be able to afford it. The eligibility for and amount of school clothing grant is decided by each individual authority and currently varies from £40 to £110 across Scotland. A short life working group looking at school clothing grant provision across Scotland reported in 2009. The group recommended that Scottish Government and COSLA should produce joint guidance for local authorities setting the minimum level of school clothing grant. Despite the Scottish Government securing power under the Education (Scotland) Act 2016 to introduce a minimum school clothing grant, a minimum grant has not

² <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1842/25787/CRFR%20briefing%2091%20-%20Treanor.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

yet been set. In its advice the Commission recommended that the Scottish Government should establish a minimum rate for school clothing grants.

The final area that the Commission identified in its report was delays and difficulties with payment of Education Maintenance Allowance which were identified as a risk in supporting young people to continue in education. Young people may struggle to pay for transport and school or college equipment until they receive their payment and the delay may make the difference in whether a young person is able to sustain further education. The Commission heard an example of a school acting to bridge the gap by providing a free bus pass until education maintenance allowance was received. The Commission recommended that the Scottish Government should work with local authorities to find ways of making the application process easier and quicker, and providing free transport to school until payment has been processed.

Additional potential areas for consideration by the Committee

Discussions amongst the Commission prior to submitting evidence to the Committee identified a number of other areas that the Commission has not had an opportunity to explore in detail but that might be useful issues for the Committee to consider as part of its inquiry.

- Teaching and the pupil-teacher relationship as it affects children who experience poverty. Both positive and negative stories have been shared with the Commission about the impact of these relationships.
- Particular support for those children who are furthest from academic attainment
- Communication with parents
- Policies in schools that actively promote mental as well as physical health
- The extent to which an understanding of the impact of poverty is covered in initial teacher training education.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's Inquiry. If you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact the Commission.



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