



**Warwick University Local Authorities Research Consortium**

**In partnership with**

**Local Government Improvement and Development**

**REPORT ON THE OUTCOMES**

**of a**

**PEER REVIEW**

**on**

**ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY**

**IN DEVON**

**Hosted by the Devon Strategic Partnership**

**14 - 15 October 2010**

**at**

**Larkbeare House, Topsham Road, Exeter EX2 4NG**

**REPORT ON THE OUTCOMES**  
of a  
**PEER REVIEW**  
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**ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY IN DEVON**

## **Background**

The potential for local councils to be a 'force for good' in tackling child poverty has been recognised for a long time. As community leaders, employers and service deliverers "Local authorities are uniquely well-placed to play a critical role in moving children out of poverty"<sup>1</sup>. As the concept of working in partnership with other organisations has taken centre stage, particularly within the framework of Local Strategic Partnerships, the potential has been borne out by some notable projects in localities. However, national government has only recently taken action to formalise the role.

The Child Poverty Bill was enacted in March of this year. Part 2 of the Act<sup>2</sup> requires responsible local authorities and their partners to cooperate in reducing child poverty within local authority areas. They must also each make arrangements to carry out a local child poverty needs assessment and prepare a joint local child poverty strategy. Local authorities will also need to demonstrate that they have taken these duties into account when preparing their Sustainable Community Strategies.

Earlier in the year, consultation had taken place within the Warwick University Local Authorities Research Consortium and its LASE<sup>3</sup> Workstream regarding the content of the programme of activities for 2010. Given the probable implications of a Child Poverty Act, members expressed support for a peer review approach in order to identify current activities and to share experience relating to preparations for the implementation of the new duty. An associated benchmarking process would also facilitate the establishment of future best practice in addressing this vital area of social exclusion.

## **Developing draft benchmarks**

This was taken forward in a scoping event held at Warwick University in March 2010. Participants received presentations on the application of Peer Review techniques and Benchmarking tools in a social exclusion context. Workshop sessions then explored their potential more specifically in the context of child poverty. An important outcome of the day was the establishment of a draft Topic Guide for use as a framework around which to structure the information gathered from each of the Reviews. This would then shape the Benchmark[s] of best practice that are intended to be the final outcome of the 2010 Programme.

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<sup>1</sup> *Child poverty and local government*, Local Government Association, London September 2003, p8.

<sup>2</sup> The Child Poverty Act 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Local Authorities Social Exclusion Network

The draft Topic Guide can be found at Appendix A of this Report. As the name suggests, the Guide is not intended to act as a rigid 'script' for each Peer conversation but rather to signpost areas of particular interest and relevance to each individual Review as it unfolds. The Topic Guide is to be tailored and adapted to match the particular interests and expertise of all those participating in the Review conversations. At the end of the Peer Review programme, the structure and content of the Topic Guide will be considered in the light of the experience before informing the preparation of the Benchmarks.

### **Peer reviews – benchmarking for child poverty**

Each peer review takes the form of a visit to a member local authorities in order to learn about their current activities relating to various aspects of the statutory duty to tackle child poverty. The small peer review teams act as 'critical friends' and include participants from other local authorities and their partners, including the voluntary sector wherever possible. It is important to recognise that the approach is intentionally 'light touch' and that the reported outcomes are essentially a 'snapshot' of current activities and plans. Subject to the consent of the host local authority, participants from other agencies, including central government departments, can be invited to act as observers as the review proceeds. The reviews themselves are intended to be 'light touch' and consist of a series of conversations with local practitioners in the field of child poverty. The members of the visiting Review Team are also informed by reading a range of background documents provided by the host.

### **The Devon Child Poverty Peer Review**

The Review Team comprised

Oonagh Aitken	National Advisor – Children, Young People & Families, Local Government Improvement and Development
Sheila Bates	The Children's Champion, Coventry City Council
Andrew Climo	Director, Community Leaders, Cornwall
Darren Farmer	Senior Research and Information Officer, Staffordshire County Council
Michelle Kennedy	Associate, Local Government Improvement and Development
Sharon McIntyre	Associate, Local Government Improvement and Development
Bob Shaw	Performance Manager, Services for Children and Young People, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council

and the Facilitators were

Clare Batty and John Hilton	Senior Research Associates, Local Government Centre, Warwick Business School
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## ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY IN DEVON

### Briefing Meeting, 14 October

The Review Team and Facilitators met together on the evening before the Review and were joined by Debbie Pritchard, Jon Richards and Gemma Hobson from Devon County Council. This briefing meeting provided an opportunity for the Team to receive an overview of child poverty in Devon and of the current activities to alleviate it. Subsequent discussion also shaped in more detail the arrangements for the following day. This meeting allowed the Team to enter into the Review process with a much clearer idea of what areas of the Topic Guide they wished particularly to pursue during their conversations and to have some knowledge of the people they would be meeting the next day.

At more than 650,000 hectares [2534 sq miles], Devon is geographically the largest county in the South-west of England. The population of 750,000 is very unevenly distributed between 28 market and coastal towns, Exeter, the only city and very large tracts of sparsely inhabited rural areas. In the context of child poverty and family deprivation, this imbalance has two major impacts

- Exeter, with more than 100,000 residents, has a huge impact upon the whole economy of the County
- Clusters of need are widely dispersed, with adverse implications for the delivery of services

Property prices are high, with a lot of second homes, but wage levels low.

Devon has three layers of local government, county, district and parish [there are more than 500 parishes] - making for a complex administrative pattern. There is an active and influential network of Children's Trusts at district level, though in times of financial constraint it is not clear that the current level of commitment and resourcing can be maintained. At the time of this Peer Review, a significant proportion of the senior officers of the County Council's Corporate Leadership Team were interim appointments pending the potential negative impact of the national Comprehensive Spending Review, causing inevitable uncertainties around the Council's future structure and service delivery capacity.

The Devon Strategic Partnership [DSP] sees child poverty as a leading issue, but as part of a wider picture of disadvantage rather than "just about children". Child poverty was one of a number of "themed conversations" that have been held by the Children's Trust, and the DSP has a Child Poverty Task Group that is currently at the scoping stage. A re-modelling of the Children and Young People Plan is under discussion.

The draft Devon Child and Family Poverty Needs Assessment<sup>4</sup> [CPFNA] is intended as an overview document and will be made more real by the inclusion of case studies. Housing and access to housing "shine through" as deprivation issues for the County, with consequent impacts for deprived families and therefore child poverty. There are

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<sup>4</sup> October 2010 v1.4 was made available to the Review Team prior to the visit.

high numbers of children looked after by the Council and by private providers for children looked after by other authorities. Rural isolation means that access to childcare is as much of a problem as its cost. Although the network of Children's Centres is well-established, they need to develop stronger outreach approaches as inaccessibility is also a problem here. Aspirations can be low and the achievement gap is widening in 11 – 16 year-olds, for those receiving free school meals, just as it is nationally. There is to be a workshop in November to begin to explore how best to use and develop the data for understanding, communication and positive action.

In the context of compiling the Needs Assessment, there is an awareness that sometimes the sparse nature of some populations can mean that in some categories there is a risk of statistics becoming distorted. In Devon, child poverty may therefore require an approach that focuses on places rather than just groups and looks at multiple needs within families. Matching data across service areas and providers is a significant challenge.

### **The Review Day, 15 October**

It is important to note that this Peer Review took place just a few days ahead of the Coalition Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. Given the size of the national budgetary deficit and the widely-trailed austerity counter-measures likely to be introduced, it provided a context of great uncertainty for all concerned in the social policy agendas.

On the day of the Review, the Team members were able to meet and talk with

Nora Corkery	Manager, Devon Welfare Rights Unit
Gemma Hobson	Information Officer, Devon Children's Trust
Liza Jarvis	Commissioning Officer for Communities, Devon County Council
Andrew Lightfoot	Team Leader Regeneration, Devon County Council
Julia Page	Head of Health Improvement, North Devon, Devon Primary Care Trust
Nick Payne	Corporate Director, West Devon Borough Council
Diane Pedley	Project Officer, Narrowing the Gap Ilfracombe and Manager, Ilfracombe and Braunton Children's Centres
Debbie Pritchard	Assistant Director, Children and Young People's Services, Devon County Council
Sue Rook	Project manager, Devon Strategic Partnership
Janet Sinclair	Devon Partnership Manager, Job Centre Plus
Robert Weeks	Project Manager, Narrowing the Gap Ilfracombe

Unfortunately, a planned conversation with Jude Giddings, Co-ordinator of the high-profile 'Quids for Kids' project, could not take place due to her illness on the day of the Review.

At the end of the Review day, initial feedback in the form of a brief summary of the Team's initial impressions, was provided for the host as a pre-cursor of the more substantial Review Outcomes Report. Table 1 below encompasses some of these early impressions in addition to the more considered outcomes of the Review that are encompassed within the main narrative of this report.

### Summary of the main strengths and areas for improvement

Table 1 below provides a brief summary of the interview outcomes. It identifies some of the main strengths evident within the current activities for tackling child poverty in Devon, together with some suggested areas for further development. The summary is structured around the core elements of the Topic Guide. These areas are then discussed in greater detail along with many other points of interest that emerged during the Review.

**Table 1:** Outline summary of Peer Review feedback

<b>The strategic approach</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Areas for further development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weaving in personalised services, eg the 'one-stop shop' approach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop countywide common understanding in the workforce</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership working well, with strong relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding at senior level needs to be cascaded</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong strategic approach on drugs and crime issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Widen the strategic planning to include the Child Poverty agenda</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some County / District relationships delivering good joined up working</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some tension between County / District / Neighbourhoods that "cuts" could make worse</li> </ul>
<b>The role of local authority leaders/champions</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Areas for further development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial inclusion / economic development leadership 'clued in' and working well</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elected members need better understanding of the agenda and levels of impact of Child Poverty</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good track record on Child Poverty since 1997 - being sustained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need elected member and corporate management team buy-in</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child Poverty Act being used well as a catalyst for wider action</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lot of interim managers at senior level and newly elected members – not widely recognised</li> </ul>
<b>Driving implementation</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Areas for further development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child Poverty Task Group automatically included in strategic group work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecting the local government tiers in achieving the 'whole'. Communication strategy between Wards for mutual understanding</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of Young Commissioners has influenced strategy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify other key stakeholders and how they can influence</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong, relevant data sets to inform action on the ground</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity on how the data will direct strategy development</li> </ul>
<b>Identifying key local ingredients for success</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Areas for further development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong vision of financial inclusion and preparation for the Enterprise Allowance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging JobCentre + at local level</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good local projects – eg <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total Place – Devon/Torbay/Plymouth</li> <li>• THRIVE 0 – 19 in North Devon</li> <li>• Local Area Framework</li> <li>• Narrowing the Gap - Ilfracombe</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Linking of 5 credit unions into one focus on micro-finance</li> </ul>	
<b>Identifying local barriers</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Areas for further development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alignment with PCT budgets, programmes and projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage the close engagement of GP consortia, especially with the loss of the PCT</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing data across organisations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing a shared sense of what the Child Poverty agenda might be in terms of communication and language</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look more at reconfiguring internal budgets - alignment / pooling - as well as external</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DSP delivery plans developed with LSPs, involving wider partners in the Child Poverty agenda</li> </ul>
<b>Recognising good practice</b>	
<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Areas for further development</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planned one-stop shop, personalised budgets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A communication strategy and a ‘common language’ for child poverty</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credit unions work on debt</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage the VCS more generally, more actively, more locally</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Levelling the playing fields’ across communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engagement with communities, especially those families experiencing poverty</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Special needs financial inclusion programme (Young Commissioners)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use more case studies as a tool for engagement</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local school-based networks supporting social cohesion</li> </ul>	

### **More Detailed findings – Strengths and Areas for Improvement**

#### **The strategic approach**

Devon has a long history, almost to the point of becoming ‘a tradition’, of high-quality work around issues of poverty and financial inclusion and some members of the Review Team were aware of aspects of the earlier work. In responding to the Duty, current attention is focused upon two main themes; supporting people back into work wherever possible and appropriate while also ensuring that those eligible for state benefits actually receive them. In focusing upon worklessness as the main route out of poverty, Devon reflects in many respects the long term thinking of the Department for Work and Pensions [DWP] and successive governments at national level.

In terms of both theme areas, worklessness and benefits, children and young people are seen within context of their wider lives, particularly that of the family. The Team heard that Devon’s approach is ‘child poverty is family poverty is community action’. While true that most child poverty occurs within this wider social setting, the adoption

of ‘family poverty’ as the focal point appears in part to have arisen from the need to ‘reassure’ partners that the work remains anchored in the wider areas of financial inclusion and narrowing the gap’. There is some concern that the focus on families may divert attention away from children and young people or result in small pockets of ‘hidden poverty’ being masked.

Members of the Review Team were pleased to receive copies of the final reports of two of the recent ‘flagship’ projects – ‘Quids for Special Kids’, the subject of a Local Public Service Agreement 2005/8, and the ‘Income Maximisation Project’ that ended earlier this year, having focused on National Indicator 118<sup>5</sup>. The thrust of each initiative, benefit take-up for families with children with additional needs and supporting parents into work, is entirely consistent with each of the main themes demonstrating an overall coherence in the thinking around poverty in Devon. During the course of the Review, it became apparent that there were many other valuable initiatives going on in areas of need across the County – too many for this Outcomes Report to acknowledge individually and in detail.

There was a consensus that Local Strategic Partnerships in both tiers have robust governance structures, and there is evidence of good partnership working within and across some areas of service provision, although in others it is seen as ‘patchy’. Elected Council members occupy places on the DSP Board, but the Officers’ Reference Group is seen as the powerhouse for action, particularly for such issues as Community Safety and Substance Misuse. There is said to remain ‘some work to be done’ to integrate child poverty into the individual plans of LSP partner agencies. Although supportive, some understand ‘child poverty’ more readily when taken as a part of a wider ‘families’ approach. Although this wider context brings together partners that would not necessarily see themselves as contributing to the child poverty agenda, as ‘co-operation with partners’ is an essential element of the Duty as set out in the Child Poverty Act, this must become a high priority for the local authorities involved.

Given the two central themes, the linkages to economic development and regeneration activity are vital. Within the Devon Economic Partnership, Jobcentre Plus chair the Worklessness Forum, which is composed of all agencies with an interest in supporting those seeking work – including the Youth Offending Team, Housing, Education and the Voluntary/Community sector. This Group feeds into the strategic Work and Skills partnership group. Significant within the particular context of child poverty is involvement of the Economic Development Unit with Corporate Parenting, the Child Poverty Task Group and its clear role in strategy development for the 14–18 age group. The six themes of the Economic Strategy include Supporting Disadvantaged Families and Worklessness.

The ‘clear voice’ of the Child Poverty Task Group is heard from its central place in the policy framework, and there is a good network of Children’s Centres also supporting the sharpening focus brought about by the duties imposed by the Act. Other local stakeholders, such as Jobcentre Plus [JCP], the Primary Care Trust (which sees deprivation as its ‘core business’), the Citizen’s Advice Bureau and Registered Social

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<sup>5</sup> NI 118: Take up of formal childcare by low-income working families.

Landlords, are showing a strong commitment to the development of the child poverty work. Almost inevitably, however, the level of some stakeholder engagement, including some councillors, GP consortia, the Children's Trust and the Department for Work and Pensions, remains an important area of 'work in progress'.

In terms of experience, expertise and commitment, therefore, Devon appears to be well-placed to meet the challenges posed by the Child Poverty Act. While it is accepted that each local partnership will set its own timescales to meet the requirement for a Child Poverty Strategy to be published by April 2011, it is perhaps surprising that the Peer Review saw little evidence of movement towards the development and articulation of such a Strategy, one of the main planks in the policy platform required by the Act. Although the main actors in the many valuable initiatives have many conversations about the contributions and relationships of their work, it seems not always apparent to them, or to the Review Team, how their work is strategically connected.

While strategic action to eliminate child poverty does not necessarily demand the existence of a Child Poverty Strategy *document*, the expectation will be for a clear programme of efficient, effective and co-ordinated action across local authorities and their partners. That in November there is to be a 'Stakeholder Summit' to examine and discuss the outcomes of the Needs Assessment is welcomed. This will not only provide an ideal opportunity to reflect on progress, but also to give measured consideration to the emerging picture before determining the way ahead.

### **The role of local authority leaders/champions**

In discussing the many valuable initiatives going on across the County, it became clear that there were many individuals who have become child poverty 'champions' by default – their roles at local level made it inevitable. During the course of the Review conversations however, it was noticed that in some wider contexts there was little sense of individual leadership coming from the most senior levels of either political or professional spheres.

This may be the unintended outcome of the conscious decision not to have a named champion for child poverty, although it is understood that the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services and the Executive Director for Children and Young People's Services do give strong leadership. There are other factors that may contribute to the suggested 'anonymity' of the developing work, such as the high number of interim appointments currently at the most senior officer level of the County and also the relative inexperience of some of the elected members. The current administration has been in place for a year and there is a view that councillors are still 'finding their feet'. There is a recognition that more needs to be done in terms of raising awareness of child poverty issues to address this.

The identification and public promotion of a formal 'champion' is, of course, not essential to the success of any strategic drive such as this as long as there is demonstrable commitment at the most senior levels. There are risks with developing a

'personality cult' even on a small scale and problems can arise when influential individuals move on.

### Driving implementation

For some years the experience, expertise and commitment of individuals working 'on the ground' has been driving the implementation of measures to eliminate child poverty across Devon. Work on financial inclusion, credit unions and welfare benefits has been at the core of this activity. The arrival of the duties embedded within the Child Poverty Act is seen as providing a sharper focus and a catalyst for drawing the work together and moving it into another dimension.

The draft CFPNA looks to be the vehicle through which implementation will be delivered. Developed through the Child Poverty Task Group with the support of the Children and Young People Group. It is based around 'Government guidance'<sup>6</sup>, but takes account of local factors, having been developed in line with the Devon Children's Trust Children and Young People Needs Assessment for 2010 and the Local Economic Assessment. It is a statistically impressive document and those responsible for producing it are to be congratulated on the detail, depth and breadth of the data it contains.

The Review Team see the forthcoming 'Stakeholder Summit' as crucial in the processes of wider engagement and of 'making it happen'. Once endorsement of the final draft has been achieved, then it will be for the partners to plan how best to set about eliminating child poverty through the informed use of tools like indicator modelling and the accurate targeting of poverty 'hotspots'.

The CFPNA is the product of good liaison between key areas of the County Council and its partners, such as that involving Commissioning and the Children's Trust, in developing strategic activities and child-specific strategies have child poverty explicitly embedded within them. The Local Area Agreement and the Sustainable Community Strategy have not yet reached this stage and, of course, may not figure so prominently in national government thinking as they have previously. The current uncertainty around the impact of national economic and policy changes is clearly unsettling.

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<sup>6</sup> This phrase reflects the terminology heard during some conversation. However, the Government has consciously avoided issuing guidance on the Duty and probably what is meant here is the Guidance issued by Local Government Improvement and Development.

## Identifying key local ingredients for success

Area Boards are felt to be succeeding in 'getting people on board' with child poverty. Dartmouth Townstal Partnership was specifically cited as an example of active participation from police, the Primary Care Trust, local councillors, residents and community and voluntary groups. Local leaders have played an important role in moving this along. The 'initial wave' of neighbourhood-based initiatives needs to include the other communities identified as deprived. This will be particularly important as the structural funding comes to an end and other resourcing becomes necessary.

There are pre-meetings for the Joint Engagement Boards, which are used to 'level the playing field' so that service users are able to play a more meaningful role in eliminating child poverty. This increased capacity has come from improving communication, breaking down silo barriers, making documents more accessible and building confidence for user representatives. Feeding back on 'what subsequently happened' is also seen as a principal reason why engagement seems to be working. Earlier, sometimes tokenistic, consultation is seen to have given way to a more genuine form of involvement and participation.

## Identifying local barriers

The physical size and character of the County presents some of the most substantial barriers to the work on tackling local child poverty and these were highlighted in the briefing received by the Team during the meeting the previous evening and confirmed in conversations. In terms of geographical area, Devon County, including Torbay and Plymouth, is as big as Kent, Surrey and Greater London combined. The disparity of the populations, hidden poverty, and the rural isolation of young people and their families combine with low wages, seasonal work, high rents, and a lack of affordable housing to challenge service delivery and provide the basis for much of the data that are captured in the developing Child Poverty Needs Assessment. In addition to the physical challenges of the geography, in many areas Broadband and mobile 'phone networks do not function. The conversations of the Review served to confirm the impression that the Team were forming in this respect – that 'joining up' isn't easy in these circumstances!

There is some frustration at the perceived tensions and lack of co-ordination, particularly between the local authorities, between which relationships are seen as 'disjointed' at times. Some of the local systems, such as procurement, are difficult to 'cut through' in attempts to develop partnership approaches. There has been little progress made towards the pooling of budgets. Workforce development and organisational change will be needed to bring about the more collaborative approaches needed to tackle crosscutting challenges such as child poverty.

JCP are active in the local child poverty work and with regional improvement and Efficiency Partnership funding have seconded a member of staff to the County's Corporate Procurement Service to influence recruitment policy in service providers and

contractors. It has also contributed to the Child Poverty Needs Assessment, although there has been frustration that they are no longer able to use GSI, which helps in focusing the data down onto neighbourhood and street levels. The ability to compile data of this specificity is particularly important when dealing with scattered pockets of need such as those in Devon. JCP are also well-connected to the local Children's Centres, albeit with a variable level of service delivery. In some Children's Centres, this has extended to the provision of Future Jobs Fund placements, eg three in Ilfracombe, as well as linked Employment Advisors.

Organisational language and communication were barriers that featured in some conversations during the day. One participant expressed the problem as 'I know my story, but I don't understand what the others are saying' – one group using one kind of descriptive language and viewpoint of their activities and another using altogether different ones – and the focal point can change 'depending who you speak to'. These differences become particularly apparent when 'pressure points' arise in the dialogue, which can make them more difficult to resolve. Currently, this is being made worse by the rapidly changing development of policy at national level. There is often insufficient time to explore clarification of meaning, obstructing the process of weaving joint action into a coherent whole and linking this to any emerging strategy for eliminating child poverty.

### Recognising good practice

Arising out of the *Every Child Matters* initiative, the Common Assessment Framework [CAF] is a standardised approach to conducting assessments of children's additional needs and deciding how these should be met. The important work being undertaken by the Narrowing the Gap project in Ilfracombe includes an exploration of the views of local people, especially parents, all of whom had experience of the CAF. The information and insights gained from local people will be invaluable in the context of child poverty strategy. THRIVE™ is a model of intervention that identifies and supports emotional and well-being issues that impact upon children's development and learning. Building on the links with CAF and the THRIVE processes will provide a useful step in raising staff awareness of the wider implications of child poverty.

Initiatives such as *Dreamcatcher* and *Backing Young People of Devon* are innovative and highlight the role of local authorities as both employers and aspirational leaders. The schemes provide young people with employment opportunities that would have been very difficult for them to identify for themselves. One successful outcome has seen young people leaving care now working in support of children with learning disabilities. *Don't stop me now!* is a project that has developed from the Extended Schools Programme and makes use of that funding. It has led to an increase in the take-up of free school meals and there is evidence that attainment has improved in this age cohort.

The Review Team was also impressed by the involvement of the Young Commissioners in Devon's work with disadvantaged young people and were pleased to receive a presentation from some Young Commissioners during the course of the Review day. The Team learned that the Young Commissioners were part of the local/national

project, *Participation in Action*. It was clear during this session that taking on the role of Commissioner had helped to bring confidence, clear self-expression and raised aspirations. The Young Commissioners had begun a peer survey looking at young people's experiences of state benefits and welfare system generally. All Survey respondents were in school, but all were from families in receipt of benefits. It also explored their goals and aspirations for later life.

The Young Commissioners had drawn up some recommendations based upon the Survey outcomes, including low parental expectations and a lack of supportive advice from agencies within 'the system' and the report included some illustrative case studies. The Young Commissioners felt that the results of the Survey 'seemed to have been listened to' by the Council and its partners. The summary of their work, *Young People of Devon's Initial Survey into Family Poverty*, contains a number of case studies that begin to make clear the debilitating impact of poverty in a way that reports, statistics and data cannot. In the battle for the hearts and minds of decision-makers, facts presented in this way can often win the day, particularly when drawn from the daily experience of young people themselves. This was supported by documentary evidence of their views having been built into Council reports.

*Messages from the voices of children and young people in Devon* comes from the Devon Children's Trust Partnership led by the County Council. Sub-titled '*ignore their views at your peril*', this document sets out an impressive summary of "the messages we hear from what children, young people and families have shared with those who work with them".<sup>7</sup> Perhaps even more importantly, there is a clear presentation of the ways in which 'the system' is responding to the messages.

## **Conclusion**

The most immediate conclusion that the Review Team drew from this 'snapshot' of the approach to tackling child poverty in Devon is that 'there is a lot going on' in terms of identifying the nature of the problems, where they are occurring and how they may best be dealt with. We apologise to all those involved in the many valuable areas of work that we have not been able to mention specifically within this Outcomes Report.

As this is a new Duty for the local authorities and necessarily for their partners, taking place during a time of great financial and organisational uncertainty, inevitably there are gaps and potential pitfalls existing among the clear signs of substantial achievements. From the conversations held as part of this Review, there emerged clear evidence that many people are aware of the challenges ahead and have the skills, experience and commitment to address them.

## **Acknowledgements**

This is a period of intense activity for all those working around the Child Poverty Act and the members of the Review Team are very grateful to all those who gave of their valuable time in order to speak to us about their developing work. Our gratitude

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<sup>7</sup> *Messages from the voices of children and young people in Devon*, Devon Children's Trust Partnership and Devon County Council, July 2010, p4.

extends not only to those listed above, but also to their colleagues who made it possible for them to take part. We particularly wish to thank Jon Richards for taking on the additional dimension of organising the Review locally. We hope that this report and the Peer Review conversations will prove useful to all of them in their work.

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