

Birmingham
Child Poverty Commission

A fairer start for all our children and young people

An independent report

Recommendations and conclusion

There is no easy way to prevent or mitigate the impact of poverty in childhood: it is not within the gift of a single organisation or body; the solutions are not simple; and it manifests itself in many different ways. However, over the course of the Commission we have kept returning to five broad themes that, if appropriately tackled at the local level, can have a significant and positive impact on reducing and mitigating child poverty in Birmingham. Under each of these broad themes, we have made a range of recommendations. Based on the evidence we have collected, the people and organisations we have spoken to, and the best practice we have looked at, we have arrived at a set of recommendations.

The need to support families and their children out of poverty is a task which sits across all levels of the statutory sector, the voluntary sector, private business and other partners. Without safe and suitable accommodation, the ability to access the city you call home and the unfettered aspiration that should characterise all children's lives, Birmingham's children will be disadvantaged by poverty, and continue to be so. In concluding the Commission has sought to not only mitigate the impact of existing poverty, but also look to the future, to raise aspirations amongst our children and young people and tackle the cycle of inter-generational poverty. It is a shared responsibility, but one which the council as the civic heart of the city must lead.

A. Raising aspirations

Children we have spoken to have told us about their aspirations to be nurses, computer engineers and teachers, before immediately rebuking themselves with "But it will never happen". Childhood should be a time when aspirations are limitless.

Birmingham is England's second city. The city is home to more than 1.1 million people, with almost 22% of residents being under 15 and 46% of residents being under the age of 30. The city needs to raise its aspirations and those of its residents. Birmingham should be challenging the economic heft of London and competing with the creativity of Manchester.

1. By September 2017, the Birmingham Secondary Schools Forum working with Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Education Partnership and Business leaders should develop a specific offer for disadvantaged pupils at KS4 to provide intensive support to narrow the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children at this level.

There is the potential that this could be funded through the pupil premium. It is proposed that a mentoring scheme with local businesses could be run alongside or be part of this specific offer for KS4 pupils.

The roll out of this scheme should focus initially on the lowest performing groups at KS4.

2. An annual or biennial 'Best of Birmingham' event should be introduced by July 2017 to showcase and celebrate outstanding children, young people and the adults that support them.

3. Birmingham City Council and Birmingham Education Partnership should assist schools to establish formal partnerships with universities, both in the UK and abroad. The purposes of doing so include: raising students' awareness and aspirations of the opportunities for higher education; enhancing partnerships between schools and universities for professional development; and influencing standards of teaching and learning.

This recommendation should be carried out by June 2017.

B. Mitigate the impact of existing poverty

While we can seek to reduce child poverty and even, ultimately, eradicate it, we must also support those currently facing it. With an average of almost 30% of children and young people in Birmingham living in poverty, families need to be supported with the day-to-day challenges poverty brings.

4. By September 2016, there should be a named Cabinet Member with responsibility for poverty.
5. By January 2017, adult education providers to provide data for all Birmingham City Council courses so that the reach and impact of adult education in the city can be appropriately analysed.
6. Through existing resources and by January 2017, the DWP (Department for Work & Pensions), working closely with schools, Birmingham City Council and the voluntary sector, should rotate benefits and other financial advisers around those schools/children's centres with high levels of need offering an outreach financial inclusion service.
7. Where required, parents should be encouraged to take up ESOL classes, particularly for groups whose language is a barrier to the labour market. These should be scheduled in schools around pick up/drop off times for children. This system should be in place by Spring Term 2017 and led by the ESOL providers in the city.
8. By January 2018, Birmingham City Council should adopt to undertake a formal review of their housing standards enforcement, with a view to introducing a landlord accreditation scheme such as that in operation in Newham.
9. By January 2018, there should be a planning restriction in place preventing new fast food outlets within 250 metres of schools.
10. By April 2017, Birmingham City Council should adopt a local 'breathing space' placing council tax accounts on hold for 21 days when a family gets in touch with them so as to enable the family time to seek independent debt advice. The Council should also adopt an explicit policy of not engaging bailiffs for families in receipt of Council Tax Support.

11. By July 2017, all schools should adapt their school uniform policy to ensure affordability is a primary consideration.
12. By December 2016 Birmingham City Council should establish the School Food Trust to provide free school meals for all school pupils whose families are in receipt of working tax credits, child tax credits and universal credit (when rolled out), with the ultimate aim of providing universal free school meals.

C. Share responsibility

Improving the lives of children and young people is not the sole responsibility of the City Council's Children, Young People and Families Service: it is the responsibility of all of Birmingham.

The impacts of poverty can be felt across the city and so require a city-wide approach to addressing them. Tackling child poverty isn't just a job for the City Council and voluntary sector: education providers, business groups and employers all need to accept responsibility and share the role of improving the outcomes and experiences of children and young people in Birmingham.

13. By December 2016, Birmingham City Council should work with JobCentrePlus and employment support providers to ensure that parents of two year olds taking up funded early education are specifically targeted with employment and skills support that encourages starting work or training, and that wrap-around childcare is sufficiently affordable and flexible to enable those parents to sustain and increase their employment opportunities.
14. Birmingham City Council should use its powers as a commissioner and champion of Birmingham to work with local businesses and the Living Wage Foundation to make Birmingham the first Living Wage City where all employers pay this minimum amount, by January 2019.
15. By June 2017, Registered Social Landlords should commit to introducing a minimum of 3-year tenancies, allowing for greater stability for tenants and landlords. By September 2017 this information should be made available for families on Birmingham City Council's website.
16. By March 2017, an audit should be completed on the number of schools that have access to counselling support and do a cost analysis of providing outreach counselling service to schools with the highest proportion of pupils in receipt of pupil premium.
17. The new city centre hub Pause should be advertised in services accessed by children and families, including the School Health Advisory Services and Children's Centres.
18. A targeted obesity programme in primary school to reduce the rise in childhood obesity should be in place by September 2017.

D. Break the cycle of poverty

Poverty perpetuates poverty

Child poverty leads to poor education attainment, which leads to fewer job opportunities, which leads to fewer better-paying jobs, which creates more poverty. This cycle can only be broken with concerted effort at each stage of the cycle. So many of the parents we spoke to who were in poverty grew up in poverty, with many of their children expecting their lives to reflect their parents'.

19. By June 2017, the tendering process should be used to ensure that new projects over £500,000 encourage greater numbers of quality apprenticeships offered to young people from low-income families in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands.
20. By January 2017, all Birmingham City Council-approved strategies should include a mandatory section on the public health and health inequality implications of the issue under consideration.
21. By April 2017, Birmingham City Council should exempt care leavers from Council Tax up to, and including, the age of 25.
22. By April 2019, Birmingham City Council should adopt a policy that no low-income family with children can be declared intentionally homeless.
23. By April 2017, Birmingham City Council should explore potential for subsidised transport for young people within city localities, using Merseytravel's 'My ticket' scheme as a model.
24. By June 2017, Birmingham City Council should have reviewed how improved data sharing processes could be used to automatically enrol children for free school meals in order to increase take up.