



PEABODY

Understanding and tackling child poverty
on Peabody estates

Executive Summary

Overview

This research was designed to investigate child poverty on Peabody estates and to look at how Peabody might use its own resources and work collaboratively with others to tackle this. Alongside an evidence review and comparative statistical analysis, the research team conducted three tiers of qualitative interviews and focus groups with experts in child poverty and with parents and frontline workers who were living and working on Peabody estates. Peabody commissioned the work described in this report as part of the commitment described in 21st Century Peabody to creating communities in which no child is living in poverty and to support its 2011-2014 business plan.

The research was undertaken between April and July 2011.

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Child poverty in London and on Peabody estates

Child poverty is measured in two main ways. The first method is centred on material deprivation and includes measures of disposable income in the household in which a child lives, the access that a child has to various material goods and other factors such as the quality of their diet. The second way of measuring child poverty concerns life chances; these can be defined in terms of educational performance and outcomes but also in terms of social development. Alongside assessments of how well a child seems to be doing at school, these measures can encompass the extent to which they are able to mix and play with other children and their access to safe green space. Extensive comparative research has shown that the UK experiences higher rates of child poverty – both in terms of material deprivation and in terms of life chances – than are found in many other societies with comparable levels of economic development.

London's children experience poverty at relatively higher rates than are found in other English regions. Peabody estates are largely located in inner London boroughs which are areas that are among the most economically deprived in England, according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation and which, according to the Child Well-Being Index, have among the highest rates of child poverty in England.

The effects of child poverty

The experts in child poverty interviewed for this research discussed material deprivation and its impact at length, but this was less of an immediate concern for the parents of children living in Peabody estates and the frontline workers who delivered services in those estates. The parents and frontline workers were most concerned about the life chances of children and the negative personal and cultural influences to which they felt children were being exposed. Several interrelated issues were reported by parents and frontline workers:

- High rates of crime and anti-social behaviour which 'normalised' these social problems, with low-level crime being so commonplace as to be viewed as simply a part of day-to-day existence. This 'normalisation' of some forms of crime raised specific concerns about how children were influenced by what they saw around them. Local exposure to the instant and (from the perspective of children) significant material gains associated with crime was also a concern.
- A lack of secure and reasonably well-paid employment and restricted options for further education or training. This was both a concern in terms of life chances, but also again because of the negative images that younger children were exposed to. Children saw that their parents, siblings, relatives and neighbours were often not succeeding in the conventional sense. On one level this was seen as a lack of direct positive role models, but on another level it created a wider social context in which people getting access to relatively well-paid work was something that was rarely or never seen.
- From the perspective of some parents and frontline workers, a belief that children and young people became accustomed to a negative social norm, against which they set and monitored their own behaviour. One key effect of this pattern was that children and young people lacked confidence and self-belief, in that there was little around them to suggest that a socially and economically 'normal' life was a realistic option for them. Children would therefore not engage with schooling and avoid or reject attempts at positive diversionary activity, in part because they did not feel they could perform well at those activities. Some parents and frontline workers identified an overcompensation for this basic lack of self-belief, with some children having wholly unrealistic expectations and drawing on mass media images which suggested that instantaneous wealth and success were possible with little effort.
- Concerns about both a lack of 'diversionary activity' and the quality and nature of some of the diversionary activity available. Some respondents thought that diversionary activity was sometimes failing to engage children because it took little account of their social norms, interests and culture, which meant that it could (inadvertently) intimidate, bore and alienate the children and young people it sought to engage with.
- From the perspective of frontline workers, families were getting into debt because of difficulties in managing restricted finances and women with children facing financial and debt problems when they escaped domestic violence.

- Greater risks of experiencing overcrowding and material deprivation for children in larger families that, in the view of frontline workers, were associated with specific cultural and ethnic minorities.
- Concerns that the physical environment of London restricted the experience of childhood because safety concerns meant children had to be supervised if they were outside the family home.
- Barriers to paid work for parents that included affordable childcare, access to paid work that generated sufficient income and also attitudinal barriers, including lack of confidence and self-belief.

Tackling child poverty

Experts in child poverty focused on the need to reduce material deprivation and improve life chances. The shift in national policy emphasis towards improving life chances was widely noted. Some concerns were raised that while the previous Labour administration had perhaps placed too great a focus on material deprivation, the current Coalition government's new focus on improving life chances was only addressing part of the problem and not enough effort was being put into tackling material deprivation. Some planned changes to the welfare system were widely viewed by experts in child poverty as likely to increase levels of material deprivation among children in London, but as these changes had not yet been introduced at the time of writing, it is not yet clear if this will be the case. Improving access to adequate and affordable housing was thought to be a major issue in relation to tackling child poverty in London.

Some research and policy has taken the view that the negative cultural norms reported on some estates and within some neighbourhoods is a deep-seated problem that is difficult to solve. This was not the perspective of the frontline workers or the parents, who tended to view the issues around the life chances and attitudes of children as something that could be addressed. Expenditure was necessary, but the parents and frontline workers believed that the following interventions would do much to address the situation and improve the life chances of children living in Peabody estates:

- Enhancement of discipline in schools and a greater emphasis on pushing children to learn, an increased police presence on the streets, more affordable childcare and expansion of advice and information services.
- Providing meaningful and productive diversionary activities for older children and teenagers for when they were outside school was a priority. These activities had to be based around what attracted children and teenagers and there was a need to build their participation into service design in order to achieve this. Experiments were being undertaken on Peabody estates with giving more choice and control to older children and teenagers to try to improve engagement. Emphasis was placed on boosting the self-confidence of children.
- Advice and support services were an ongoing need. While cuts were a concern, central London remained a service-rich environment, but families sometimes needed help to successfully navigate their way to the various services that could help them. In outer London, the range of services available to families was significantly more restricted than was the case for central London.
- Services that supported parents and teenagers who recently left school into education, training and employment and more access to affordable childcare were advocated as ways of improving access to paid work.
- Assistance with parenting skills for those who needed support and help in bringing up their children.

Ways forward

In addition to offering high-quality affordable housing, something that in and of itself helps counteract the risk of material deprivation among children in London, Peabody's community development work also helps tackle child poverty. This research suggests that the following activities might be considered by Peabody to enhance its response to child poverty on its estates:

- The expansion and extension of the existing Peabody Tenant and Families Services team. This might include the provision of specialist workers for children and specific support for parenting. Good-quality welfare advice seems likely to become increasingly important to poor families, as does advice and help with managing money and debt.
- The expansion and extension of existing Peabody Employment Broker services, perhaps including specific services for parents with young children and lone parents with young children.
- Direct support of good-quality employment opportunities for parents. This might include loans and support for those seeking to set up small businesses and the direct or indirect support of development of social enterprises that provide flexible but relatively well-paid work for parents living on Peabody estates. Models such as Time Banking are already being actively explored by Peabody.
- Direct or indirect support of credit unions that offer an affordable alternative to poor families when they need to borrow money.
- Direct or indirect support for childcare service provision for Peabody residents. Indirect support might include the conversion of empty or underused buildings which might be provided at a very low or nominal rent to childcare services.
- Supporting provision of positive, productive and engaging activities for children and teenagers, including after-school activities, activities during school holidays and for teenagers who leave school at 16. This might include joint working and cooperation with local schools and children's centres and with the children and youth services provided by boroughs and charities. Promoting self-esteem and a sense that life potentially offers much wider horizons than children have grown up with was important from the perspective of parents and frontline workers.
- Consideration of the use of innovative methods of promoting community cohesion and minimising intergenerational tensions through techniques such as community philosophy.
- Consulting with residents and frontline workers on Peabody estates about cuts to local services and reviewing whether or not Peabody might directly or indirectly support valued services that are under threat of constriction or closure.
- Looking towards enhanced participation of families on Peabody estates as a way to improve service provision and exploring the use of models such as peer support systems to help address child poverty and its consequences. More generally, this research has shown that the voices of parents and frontline workers engaged with children in poverty are not as present in London-wide and national level debates about child poverty as they could be. It is arguably the case that a lack of any real voice in the political process is one of the defining characteristics of the families experiencing child poverty. One of the reasons why policy responses are not always as effective as hoped may be that they take little account of the views of the families and children concerned. Enhancing the voice of parents and children in poverty in London may be key to tackling this social problem and this is a challenge that Peabody might consider.



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