

# How do experts think child poverty should be measured in the UK? An analysis of the Coalition Government's consultation on child poverty measurement 2012-13

Kitty Stewart and Nick Roberts

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Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion  
London School of Economics  
Houghton Street  
London WC2A 2AE  
CASE enquiries – tel: 020 7955 6679

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For further information on the work of the Centre, please contact the Centre Manager, Jane Dickson, on:

Telephone: UK+20 7955 6679  
Fax: UK+20 7955 6951  
Email: [j.dickson@lse.ac.uk](mailto:j.dickson@lse.ac.uk)  
Web site: <http://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case>

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## **Editorial note**

Kitty Stewart is Associate Professor of Social Policy at the LSE and a Research Associate at CASE. Nick Roberts recently completed an MSc in Social Policy (Research) at the LSE.

## **Abstract**

This paper examines responses to a 2012-13 government consultation on child poverty measurement. It explores what these responses tell us about attitudes towards the child poverty indicators in the Child Poverty Act 2010, and about the extent of support for a broader approach to measurement. The study was motivated by the amendments to the Child Poverty Act put forward by the Conservative Government in 2015. Using a Freedom of Information request, we gained access to 251 of the 257 consultation responses, which came from individuals and organisations with a wide range of expertise, including academics, local authorities, frontline services and children's charities. Our analysis finds strong support for the original suite of measures and near universal support for keeping income at the heart of poverty measurement; poverty is understood primarily to be a relative lack of material resources, with income widely believed to be the best proxy measure. While there is considerable support for capturing information around other dimensions, these are generally seen as causes or consequences of poverty, or as broader life chance measures, not as measures of child poverty itself. The paper also considers the government's published summary of the consultation responses, and discusses differences between the government's interpretation and our own.

Key words: child poverty; poverty measurement; consultation; life chances; UK; DWP

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Corresponding author: [K.J.Stewart@lse.ac.uk](mailto:K.J.Stewart@lse.ac.uk)

## Introduction

In 2015 the Conservative Government proposed radical changes to official child poverty measurement in the UK. The Welfare Reform and Work Bill that was put before Parliament in Autumn 2015 contained a series of amendments to the Child Poverty Act 2010. These included the removal of the child poverty measures and targets and the scrapping of requirements on national and local government to monitor and to act to reduce income poverty and material deprivation. In place of the lost indicators, new clauses would require the Government to track (a) the number of children living in workless households and long-term workless households; and (b) educational attainment at age 16 for all children and for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Government also announced that it intended to develop “a range of other measures and indicators of root causes of poverty, including family breakdown, debt and addiction” (DWP 2015).

In this paper we examine responses to a recent government consultation on child poverty measurement to assess the extent to which these proposals drew on understanding and expertise within the UK of what child poverty is and how it should be measured. The consultation was carried out by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2012-13 and garnered 257 responses, from academics, local authorities, civil society, the voluntary sector, front-line workers and unaffiliated individuals. The government published a brief summary of the responses in an Appendix to another consultation document in 2014 (HM Government 2014), but did not publish the findings in detail, and never responded to the weight of opinion expressed.

Our analysis draws on information provided by the DWP under two separate Freedom of Information requests, one of our own and one from the Child Poverty Action Group. These have given us access to the DWP’s internal analysis of the findings and to the full content of 251 of the 257 responses themselves. We use this information to answer a series of questions:

- What appetite was there among respondents for changing the measures included in the Child Poverty Act?
- Did respondents think income should continue to be included in the UK’s child poverty measure? If so, should a measure of relative low income be included?
- What did respondents think about the introduction of new multi-dimensional poverty measures, as either a replacement for or in addition to the current measures?
- What did respondents say about the value of these particular dimensions, the first five of which were later taken forward by government:
  - Worklessness
  - Educational attainment
  - Family breakdown
  - Addiction

- Debt
- Housing

The paper begins by setting out the context and background, briefly describing the introduction of the official child poverty measures, the consultation held in 2012-13, and the Conservative Government's 2015 proposals. We go on to discuss the design of the consultation itself in a little detail, because this is relevant to the interpretation of some of the findings. The heart of the paper examines the content of the consultation responses in relation to child poverty measurement, taking each of our questions in turn.

## 1. Child poverty measurement in the UK since 1999

The origin of the UK's official child poverty targets lies in Tony Blair's pledge in 1999 to "eradicate child poverty in a generation" (Blair 1999). Unexpected at the time, and potentially just another piece of political rhetoric, Blair followed up by asking officials at the DWP to start developing trackable measures and interim targets. A consultation on measurement was conducted in 2002, followed by further methodological work drawing on the expertise of a technical working group. These exercises ultimately led the government to adopt what they called a "tiered approach," comprising three inter-related indicators "capturing different aspects of poverty whilst respecting the finding of our consultation that income is at the core of people's conception of poverty" (DWP 2003, p.1). The indicators were:

- *An 'absolute' low income measure* (below 60% of median equivalised household income in 1998/99, uprated with price inflation) – "to measure whether the poorest families are seeing their incomes rise in real terms"
- *A relative low income measure* (below 60% of median equivalised household income before housing costs) – "to measure whether the poorest families are keeping pace with the growth of incomes in the economy as a whole"
- *A combined measure of material deprivation and low income* – "to provide a wider measure of people's living standards".

For child poverty to be said to be falling, all three indicators needed to be moving in the right direction (DWP 2003). Targets for each were set for 2020/21, along with interim targets for 2004/05 and 2010/11. Additional indicators, including low income measured against alternative thresholds, persistent poverty (living in a household below the relative poverty line in three out of four years), and wider multi-dimensional measures of health inequalities, educational attainment and housing quality would continue to be measured and published in the government's *Opportunity for All* reports. (In practice, the report itself ceased publication in 2006, for reasons that were not clear, although the indicators were still published every year (Hills et al 2009).)

In 2008 Gordon Brown announced Labour's intention to enshrine the child poverty targets in law. The Child Poverty Act 2010 was passed in March 2010, shortly before Labour lost office in the May general election. It established four separate child poverty targets to be met by 2020/21, one for each of the original three measures plus a target for persistent poverty. In addition, it introduced requirements for the UK Government (and the Scottish and Northern Irish Ministers) to publish a child poverty strategy, set up a Child Poverty Commission to provide advice, and report annually on progress towards the targets. In preparing the child poverty strategy, the Act required the Secretary of State to consider measures in a series of policy areas, which came to be known as "building blocks": parental employment and skills; financial support for children and parents; information and advice to parents, including parenting skills; health, education, childcare and social services; and housing and the built environment (Kennedy 2014). The Act also placed duties on local authorities and other "delivery partners" in England to conduct a local needs assessment, produce a child poverty strategy and to work together to tackle child poverty.

The Child Poverty Act was clearly designed to tie the hands of future governments to delivering on a Labour priority. Despite the arguably questionable nature of such an endeavour, the legislation had cross-party support, although there were dissenting voices. The Conservatives voted for the Bill and pledged commitment to eradicating poverty, but made it clear that they disagreed with the actual measures included. Lord Freud, then the Opposition Spokesman on Welfare Reform, argued that the measures were "poor proxies for achieving the eradication of child poverty", and said the Conservatives would focus on "tackling the causes rather than the symptoms of poverty," naming four areas in particular – worklessness, family breakdown, educational attainment and drug and alcohol addiction (HL Deb, 15 January 2010, cc25-27). The Liberal Democrats expressed strong support for the commitment to end child poverty, but raised a series of smaller concerns, including whether the 'absolute' target was necessary, whether the Child Poverty Commission had been given sufficient teeth and resources, and the lack of explicit recognition of the needs of disabled children and parents (Kennedy 2014).

In 2012, the Coalition Government put out a consultation document, *Measuring Child Poverty*, which set out its concerns with the existing measures (HM Government 2012). First among these concerns, creating "the urgent need to rethink our approach to measuring child poverty" (p.10), was the fact that relative income poverty had fallen during the recession that followed the financial crash, in part because of a decline in median living standards, thus giving a spurious impression of progress. In addition, the document argued that the measures in the Child Poverty Act focused too heavily on income, failing to "capture the full experience of growing up in poverty or the barriers to getting out of poverty" (p.13). It proposed instead the introduction of a multidimensional measure, which "will allow us to consider a range of factors that, when taken together, will reflect the reality of growing up in poverty in the UK today and how this has an impact on outcomes in later life" (p.15). The consultation questions asked respondents what they thought about the inclusion of particular factors in such a measure.

The consultation received 257 responses from individuals and organisations with a wide range of experience and expertise – academics, think tanks, local authorities, civil society, children’s charities, front line workers and individuals. The responses were summarised very briefly in an Appendix to the 2014-17 Child Poverty Strategy, published in February 2014 (HM Government 2014).

The issue was then set aside for the remainder of the administration, amid reports that internal agreement about next steps could not be reached (‘Plans to change child poverty measures hit impasse,’ *The Guardian*, Friday 14 February 2014). The only amendments to the Child Poverty Act introduced by the Coalition were to rename the Child Poverty Commission the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, and to require a social mobility as well as a child poverty strategy.

However, the idea had not been forgotten. Soon after the Conservative Government was returned with a majority in May 2015, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, declared that the Government would be introducing a “new and strengthened approach to tracking the life chances of Britain’s most disadvantaged children” (DWP 2015). A DWP press release stated that the “current child poverty measure – defined as 60% of median income – is considered to be deeply flawed and a poor test of whether children’s lives are genuinely improving,” giving as an example the fall in relative poverty during the recent recession. It announced that legislation would be introduced to replace the Child Poverty Act 2010, and that the new core indicators would be the proportion of children in workless households and the educational attainment of 16-year-olds. In addition, it said that the government would also develop “a range of other measures and indicators of root causes of poverty, including family breakdown, debt and addiction, setting these out in a children’s life chances strategy”.

In Autumn 2015 the changes were published as amendments to the Child Poverty Act within the Welfare Reform and Work Bill. Between them, the amendments proposed the following changes:

- The retrospective renaming of the Child Poverty Act 2010 to the Life Chances Act 2010.
- The repeal of nearly all the provisions in the Act, including the requirement to report on the four measures and their targets; the requirement to have a UK child poverty strategy (though those for Scotland and Northern Ireland remain); and the duties placed on local authorities to conduct a local child poverty needs assessment, to develop a local child poverty strategy, and to co-operate with partner authorities to reduce child poverty and to mitigate its effects.
- The renaming of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (which had originally been the Child Poverty Commission) as the Social Mobility Commission.
- The introduction of a new requirement for the Secretary of State to publish an annual report containing data for England on children living in workless

households, children living in long-term workless households, educational attainment of all children and educational attainment of disadvantaged children at the end of Key Stage 14 (age 16). No targets or required strategies were attached to these measures.

In the light of the significance of these proposals, and our own misgivings at the dropping of all income and material deprivation indicators from child poverty measurement (our own position on this is summarised in the cover letter of the CASE response to the consultation: see Stewart et al 2013), we decided to examine the content of the full range of responses to the consultation. We submitted a Freedom of Information request to the DWP in July 2015, and by November had access to 251 of the 257 responses. Of the remaining six, four respondents had requested that their response remain confidential, and two others (one from a council and one from an individual) appear to have got lost in transit.

The findings below are based primarily on our reading of these 251 responses, though we had two further sources to draw on: the DWP's own brief published summary of the responses (HM Government 2014), and the spreadsheet that sits behind this summary, which was released to the Child Poverty Action Group in response to their own Freedom of Information request in 2014. Where possible we have tried to check our interpretation against the DWP's by comparing our numbers with theirs.

## **2. Methodology: the consultation's and our own**

It is clear that several aspects of the way that *Measuring Child Poverty* was framed, and the coverage and wording of the questions themselves, shaped the way that respondents addressed the questions. This means that any meaningful analysis of the responses cannot simply count tick boxes, but becomes a qualitative exercise in the interpretation of text. We highlight here the key points that a reader should be aware of as context to the rest of the discussion in the paper. Some of these points concern ways in which the document may be considered 'leading' – presenting information in a way that seems designed to elicit particular answers. Others relate to confusion about concepts or ambiguous wording, which led respondents to approach questions from different starting perspectives.

First, the consultation document was designed around the underlying assumption that a multidimensional measure *would be introduced*, with no questions asking directly about support for that concept. Instead, the focus was on gathering views about how particular dimensions might fit into a new multidimensional indicator. Here is a typical question:

Q5 “How important is worklessness as a dimension in a future multidimensional measure of child poverty?”



Indeed, the document pushed respondents towards thinking of poverty as being multidimensional rather than specifically concerned with material resources. This was the (somewhat circular) definition of poverty provided:

“In this document, where we have referred to *poverty*, we are asking about what it means to grow up experiencing the myriad of factors that make up the reality of child poverty in the UK today. Where we are referring to income alone we have made that explicit.” (p.9)

Second, there was no question asking about support for the existing child poverty measures. The questions about income were framed in the same way as for other dimensions (with Q4 also implying that an income poverty measure that uses a threshold – as all headcount poverty measures must do, in one way or another – is problematic):

Q2: “How should we measure income as a dimension in a future multidimensional measure of child poverty? How important are relative and absolute income?”

Q4: “How can an income dimension in a multidimensional measure of child poverty avoid the drawbacks associated with a simple income threshold?”

Third, the document slipped between a series of different underlying concepts when discussing what the multidimensional measure might be seeking to capture. These different concepts were not clearly defined but were revealed through various statements about what the measure should achieve (emphasis has been added):

“Only through a better representation of the reality of children’s lives will we truly know how many children are in poverty in the UK.” (Foreword by Iain Duncan Smith, p.1)

“Most fundamentally, we need to think about the causes of poverty, and routes out of poverty.” (Foreword by David Laws; p.3)

“The dimensions suggested are a result of conversations with children, young people and charities, and analysis of academic evidence regarding factors that affect children’s lives and life chances.” (p.6)

A large number of respondents highlighted the way that both the document and the proposed dimensions conflated measures of current poverty, factors associated with poverty, risk factors, consequences, and drivers of children’s longer-term life chances. We return to this theme in Section 6 below.

Fourth, the document was misleading in its representation of the measures in the Child Poverty Act. While all four measures were listed in a box, the text implied that the relative income measure was the only measure used to capture child poverty in the UK. The document referred on five separate occasions to the fact that relative child

poverty fell during the recession because of the decline in median income. Oddly, to make this point it highlighted the fact that ‘absolute’ poverty meanwhile remained unchanged, without mentioning that the Child Poverty Act included the ‘absolute’ and combined low income and material deprivation measures at least in part in order to give a fuller picture in such a situation.

More broadly, information and research evidence was in places presented in a leading way and without due attention to the quality of sources of evidence. For example, the document stated that: “Where income comes from is critically important. Income from benefits does not have the same effect as income from work” (p.20). No supporting evidence was provided for this statement, the only reference being a study comparing outcomes for children from working and non-working households. Later, a poll from the online website *Money Saving Expert* was used to suggest that there is limited public support for a relative poverty line, in the context of a discussion about the importance of a poverty measure being acceptable to the public. No reference was made to extensive evidence on public attitudes towards poverty available from more robust quantitative sources such as the British Social Attitudes Survey. The absence of evidence, alongside the sense that the government has overlooked many years of government research and collaboration with academics on these issues, was frequently raised by respondents. (Here and throughout the paper, we present the respondent categorisation used by the DWP in their own analysis, and also used in our tables and figures.)

We are acutely aware of the range of materials and research available on the specific issue of the measurement of poverty and deprivation. Consequently we are surprised that little of this expert research is reflected in the pages of the current consultation. (*Community Foundation for Northern Ireland; Other*)

The consultation document... ignores five decades of research by Government and academics, including the development of the child poverty target in the 1990s. It ignores the ‘Opportunity for all’ indicators developed by the last government, the Cabinet Office work on social exclusion, the indicators discussed by this Government in the Child Poverty Strategy and the Frank Field review, as well as the work undertaken by the Office for National Statistics on child well-being. (*All Party Parliamentary Group, based on a specially commissioned debate, held on 24th January 2013, between York University, Centre for Social Justice and Child Poverty Action Group; Other*)

Finally, there are some more specific details about the way the questions were asked that make it hard to interpret some of the answers. As illustrated by Q5 on worklessness (reproduced above), many of the questions on individual dimensions leave respondents in a complicated position in choosing between the tick boxes attached to each dimension (‘very important’, ‘important’, ‘slightly important’, ‘not important’, and ‘not sure’). For example, how does one respond if one agrees that having a working parent is protective against poverty, or believes that it is important

in other ways for children's well-being, but does not agree that it should be considered a measure of child poverty? Or if one thinks worklessness *should* be considered a dimension of child poverty, but does not agree that there should be a single multidimensional measure? In the words of one respondent:

The phrasing of the questions is such that it is very difficult to show disagreement with the basic premises of the questions. By framing the whole consultation in this way, and not presenting any alternative options, we feel this missed an opportunity for genuine open dialogue with those who are experienced in this field. (*Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council; Other*)

There are additional complications in relation to some of the dimensions. The dimensions on 'Family Stability' and 'Unmanageable Debt' do not define what is meant by these concepts. The dimension headed 'Access to Quality Education' focuses specifically on 'failing schools' and phrases the question differently to other domains:

Q15 "What impact does attending a failing school have on a child's experience of poverty?"

For education and family stability, but not for other domains, a follow up question asked about the impact on 'life chances' specifically, suggesting that these two domains may be perceived to be different to others, but this is not made clear.

As noted, these issues mean that our analysis cannot simply add up the tick boxes in response to particular questions. Instead, our classifications of responses have been based on our reading of the text in cover letters and comment boxes. This in turn means that, where we present tables with numerical breakdowns of attitudes, these numbers should be treated as rough guides rather than as precise estimates. We have created categories in the tables that seek to cover the main thrusts of the responses, but while in many cases it was possible to group responses with ease, in many others the boundaries between one category and another were blurred. We have tried to err in all cases on the side of generosity to a position of change – for example, agreeing that a response is open to including additional measures *as child poverty measures* if the respondent says the domain is important and does not explicitly state that they are averse to wider measures of poverty. Nevertheless the decision was not always clear cut.

It is evident that the DWP conducted a similar exercise in their own analysis: the categories in their spreadsheet do not match the consultation questions and it is clear that in order to group responses they have also analysed cover letters and comment boxes. However, we have not always been able to reproduce their numbers. We include their findings and discuss potential reasons for discrepancies where relevant, but the differences provide further evidence of the importance of interpretation.

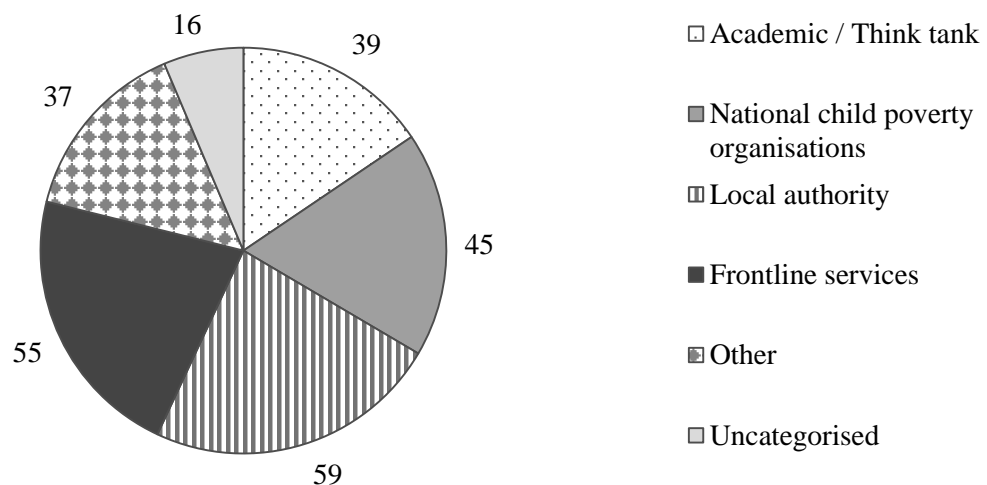
One final question needs addressing – whether to treat all responses as of equal value in relation to all questions. One issue here is that some responses come from individuals, while others are written on behalf of a research group or a large organisation. A second challenge is that some responses are lengthy, well considered, and well evidenced, revealing many years of active thought and engagement with questions of poverty and disadvantage, while others comprise a brief email and/or display a lack of understanding of the basics of poverty measurement. If they were student essays, not all responses would be given the same mark; should they all be given the same weight in summing up results? Cutting across this is a third complication, which is that respondents have very different *types* of expertise and experience, from conceptual and technical understanding of child poverty measurement, to organisation and service delivery, to front line experience working directly with families. There are also responses reflecting personal experience of poverty. While this breadth is a positive aspect of the body of responses when taken as a whole, it may reasonably be argued that not all types of experience are equally reliable on all questions.

In practice, our approach (like the DWP’s) has been to give each response an equal weight in all tables; any other strategy would be complicated and in some respects arbitrary, and could be accused of unduly weighting one type of expertise or experience over others. However, we do aim to give a sense of where – if at all – there are differences in the balance of opinion between different types of respondents, and where any stand-out opinions appear to be coming from.

### 3. An overview of the responses

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of respondents by the main categories of organisation used by the DWP. We use these categories throughout the paper for consistency with DWP breakdowns, though in some cases respondents classified themselves differently.

**Figure 1: Number of responses from different types of respondent**



Note: 251 in total.

In the following sections we examine what respondents said in relation to each of our questions of interest. We begin here by providing an overall summary of the nature of responses, which we found could be grouped into five broad categories (see also Figure 2).

*Group 1: Reject change and reject process*

This first group, comprising just over a quarter of all respondents, refused to engage with the majority of questions at all. Many of them ignored the form, using a separate cover letter for their response. Where they did use the form they left the questions on individual dimensions blank, or ticked ‘not important’, or repeated a formula in all boxes, such as “poverty is primarily about income” or “This is not a measure of poverty”. In many cases they expressed frustration with the form and with the overall design of the consultation. Whilst the majority rejected the proposals outright, a smaller number were open to the collection of additional information alongside the current measures, although without going into detail about exactly what. Academics / think tanks and frontline services were more heavily represented in this group than local authorities and children’s charities:

We are submitting our responses in a separate document rather than completing the consultation response form. The consultation response form has been structured with the assumption that there is acceptance on moving towards measuring child poverty as proposed in the consultation document... We think it is pertinent to first address whether one agrees or not with the new proposed measure of child poverty. (*Poverty Journal Club, University of Oxford; Academic/Think tank*)

*Group 2: Reject change, engage with process*

A second group, the largest (around a third of all responses) engaged fully with the consultation, answering individual questions on either the form or in a separate written response. The majority within this group expressed support for gathering additional information, though *not* as measures of child poverty, with a smaller number rejecting the proposals outright despite their full responses. It is not possible to assess whether this group really had a different attitude to the first group on the value of extra measures, or whether they simply had a more ‘helpful’ or diplomatic approach. While this group responded on individual dimensions, they often avoided the tick boxes, sometimes explaining why they had done so. This approach was most common among children’s charities (we put 60% of charities in this box), followed by local authorities and then academics/think tanks.

Given that we do not support the introduction of a multi-dimensional measure of child poverty for the reasons outlined, it is difficult for us to answer the consultation questions directly (many of which assume support for the basic idea). We will therefore outline in the rest of this response our thoughts on the extent to which the Government’s eight dimensions would be suitable for including within a revised Child Poverty Strategy as a part of a package of measures aimed at capturing

the lived experience of those living in poverty. (*Barnardo's; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

*Group 3: Reflective support for change*

A small third group stated support for change from a position of reflection, arguing that the current measures were flawed or insufficient and that there were gains to be made from either changing or building on them. Responses ranged from those who proposed completely overhauling the current measures, to those who saw a role for an additional non-income based multidimensional measure alongside the current measures, to those who advocated revising the way that income is currently measured. About 12% of all responses fall into this group, including 20% of local authorities and 15% of academics/think tanks.

*Group 4: Implicitly accept change*

The fourth group, 15%, posed the most challenges in interpretation. These responses appeared to accept without question the idea that a multidimensional measure would be introduced. They engaged with the questions on each dimension from that starting point, though the specific question they had in mind when answering seemed to vary: in different cases it might be 'Does this dimension matter for children's life chances?', 'Does it affect children's well-being?' or 'Is this correlated with poverty?' Given this, whilst the majority in this group implied support for the shift to a multidimensional measure as proposed, others were more difficult to interpret. This approach was most common among local authorities (28%), followed by front line services (16%), and was less common among academics/think tanks and children's charities. Several responses in this group thanked the DWP for the opportunity to participate.

In general, the consultation was relatively easy, though some of the questions are rather hard to answer, being somewhat specific questions about rather general subject areas at the current time. They would be easier if respondents were given specific options and asked which they preferred. I assume that when the proposals are developed further, this sort of consultation will be possible. (*Tees Valley United; Local authority*)

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to contribute to the debate in this important policy area. We hope our input is useful. (*St Vincent de Paul Society; Other*)

We have completed this questionnaire with parents who attend our children's centre... They did not find the questions particularly easy but would like their contribution acknowledged and would like to be involved in any future discussions. (*Birkenhead and Tranmore Children's Centre Advisory Board; Frontline Service*)

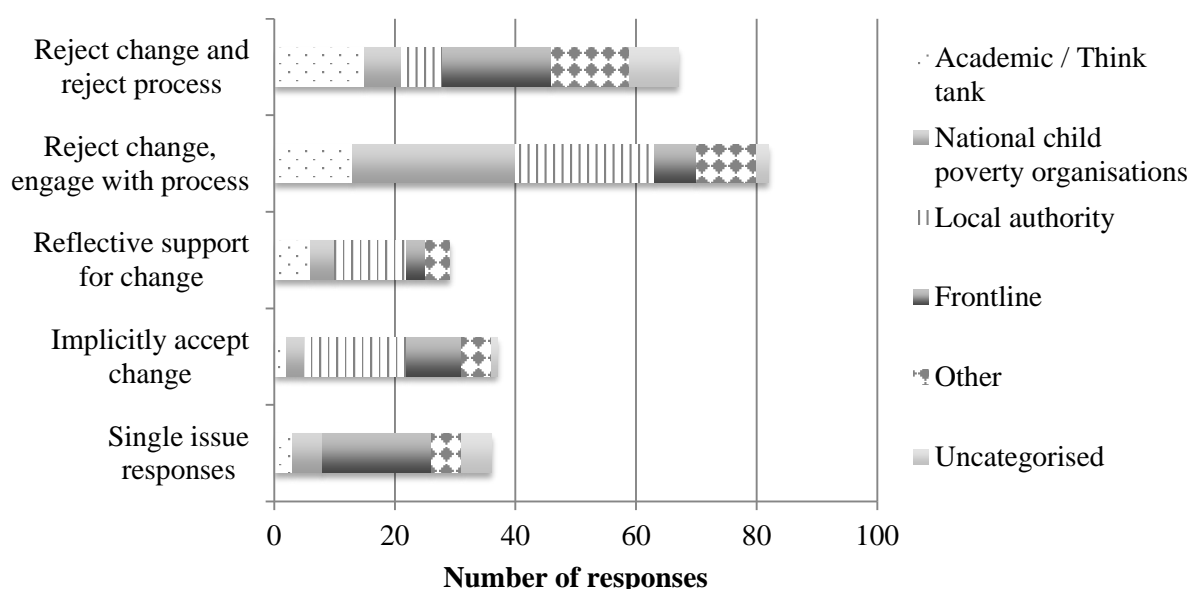
*Group 5: Single issue responses*

Finally, there were a number of responses, often from single-issue charities, which focused on highlighting the importance of one issue (problem debt, teenage pregnancy, costs in rural areas). We also categorised under this heading responses from individuals that focused on personal concerns not directly related to the questions and those focused on narrow technical aspects of the proposals such as measurement. Whilst these responses may briefly outline an overarching position in relation to the proposals, beyond that they focused squarely on a particular area of concern and engaged little with other questions. Some 14% of all responses fall into this group.

Some questions I felt were not relevant to the type of work we do so therefore would have little experience which would translate into not being able to give an opinion on. (*England Illegal Money Lending Team; Frontline Service*)

Rather than expand on the good responses to the challenges facing a multidimensional measure (on which we agree with CASE at the LSE and ISER at University of Essex), or on the confusion between causes, consequences and indicators (see also Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s and CPAG’s response), Runnymede’s consultation response rather highlights the specific experiences and reasons for child poverty among ethnic minority groups. (*The Runnymede Trust; Academic/Think tank*)

**Figure 2: Responses categorised by their overall position, Authors’ analysis**



Note: 251 in total.

#### 4. Is there an appetite for a change in the official indicators?

Our first research question is whether responses reveal an appetite for changing or replacing the four official child poverty indicators. The short answer to this question is no – or at least, such an appetite is very limited. On our reading, 146 out of 251 respondents (58%) made it clear that they did *not* support a change in child poverty measurement, and wanted to keep the existing measures as they were. These responses either explicitly expressed support for the terms of the Child Poverty Act 2010 (despite not being asked about the Act within the consultation) or stated that they would like to see the current measures continued. In Table 1, this group has been divided into two: 83 respondents who stopped at this (or even explicitly ruled out wider supplementary measures), and a further 63 who wanted to keep the four indicators as the only measures of child poverty, but expressed openness to the idea of collecting additional supplementary measures of life chances or child well-being.

Of the remainder, 26 respondents (10%) were open to wider child poverty measures, but wanted these to be *in addition to* the existing four indicators, while 18% did not provide enough information for us to group them. That leaves 14% of respondents (37 respondents) in support of changing the existing measures. In five cases this took the form of changes to the measurement of financial resources, such as a switch to using a minimum income standard for the poverty line, or to the use of expenditure rather than income measures. The remaining 32 respondents expressed a view that suggested they would like broader measures of child poverty, beyond material resources, with at least the implication that these would replace the current measurement approach, though only two of these stated this explicitly.

Figure 3 shows that, while there are differences in the balance of responses among the categories of respondent, support for change is limited across all categories. National Child Poverty Organisations are least likely to be in favour of changing the existing measures (just 7% of them would like to do so), but there is no category in which more than 20% favour change.

Interestingly, however, our reading still finds rather more support for change than the DWP's own analysis, which is presented in Table 2 for comparison. The DWP identify only 14 of 257 responses (just 5%) calling for the replacement of the existing measures. Their analysis instead places substantially more responses than ours into the 'Don't know/no comment' category, indicating that we have grouped some responses as pro-change which the DWP decided it was not possible to interpret. For example, if respondents expressed support for wider or different indicators, or for the idea of multi-dimensional measurement, and did not explicitly state that this was *in addition* to existing measures, we placed them in the 'yes, to replace' box. Thus our 14% can be seen as a generous or upper end estimate of the share of respondents wanting to change the measures in the Act. We also appear to have come off the fence a little in the other direction too, though to a lesser extent, classifying 83 (of 251) responses as 'no, keep as they are', in contrast to 74 (of 257) by the DWP.



**Table 1: Does the respondent see the need for new measures? Authors' analysis**

Does the respondent see the need for new measures?	Academic / Think tank	Nat. Child Pov. Org.	Local Authority	Front-line	Other	Uncategorised	Total	%
Yes, to replace current measures	5	3	12	8	4	0	32	13%
Yes, to change income measures	2	0	1	2	0	0	5	2%
Yes, in addition to current measures	2	4	12	4	3	1	26	10%
No, but open to supplementary measures	10	20	13	11	8	1	63	25%
No, keep as they are	17	14	16	15	12	9	83	33%
N/A	3	4	5	15	10	5	42	17%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>251</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Our own analysis of consultation responses.

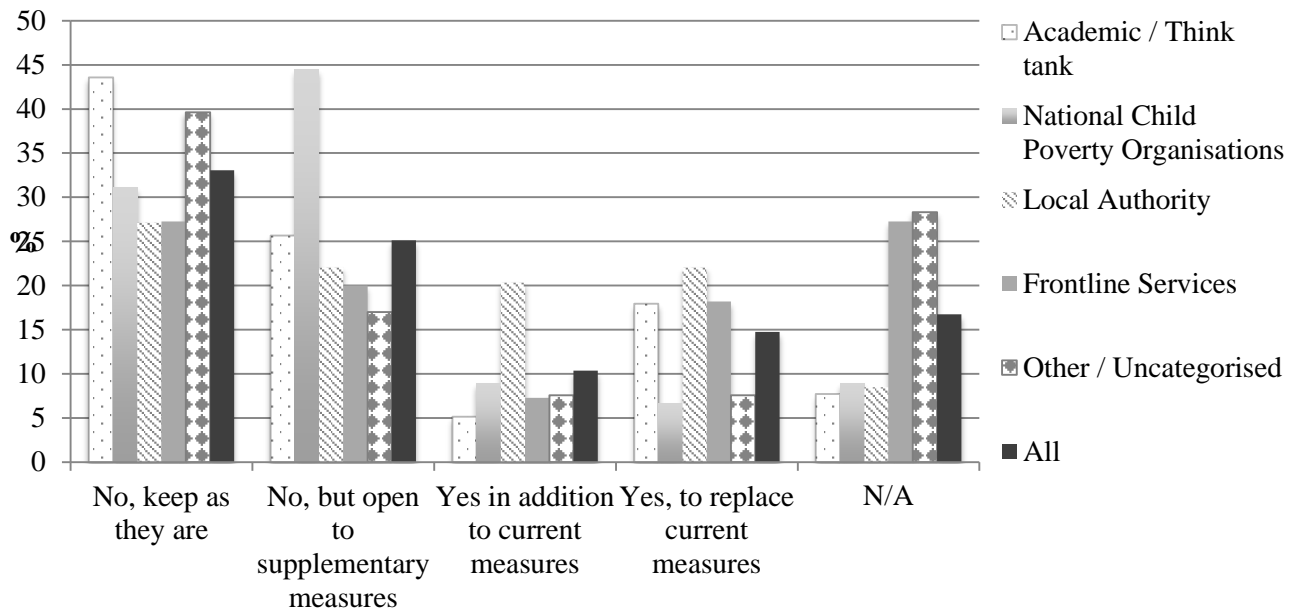
**Table 2: Does the respondent see the need for new measures? DWP analysis**

Does the respondent see the need for new measure(s)?	Academic / Think tank	Nat. child pov. Org.	Local authority	Front-line	Other	Total	%
Yes, to replace current measures	2	2	5	3	2	14	5%
Yes, but only in addition to current measures	13	23	21	14	12	83	32%
Yes, but only in addition to relative income	0	5	3	2	1	11	4%
No, keep the current measures as they are	16	12	14	18	15	75	29%
Don't know / no comment / other (add to any other comments)	11	2	17	29	15	74	29%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: DWP spreadsheet released to the Child Poverty Action Group.

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foi-query-about-a-consultation-on-the-child-poverty-strategy-2014-to-17>)

**Figure 3: Does the respondent see the need for new measures? Authors' analysis (% of responses from each type of organisation)**



Note: 251 responses in total. ‘Yes, to replace current measures’ includes the 5 respondents who just wanted to amend the income measures.

The other main way in which our numbers differ from those of the DWP is that we have chosen a different breakdown of the intermediate groups – those not wanting to replace the measures, but happy to support some change. The DWP has grouped all these together, though breaking out those who specifically highlight the relative income measure. We have separated responses which were open to new measures as *child poverty* measures from those happy to have additional measures of *causes or consequences* of poverty or of *children’s wider well-being or life chances*. The importance of drawing this distinction is raised repeatedly by respondents. Overlooking the distinction leads the DWP to summarise results in a very misleading way, as discussed at the end of this section. Before we get to that discussion we provide some more detail on the content of responses.

*Support for the existing measures*

Among the 146 respondents in clear support of retaining the existing measures as the only indicators of child poverty, a number of reasons were given. Many responses emphasised the fact that the four measures have been carefully developed and draw on prior analysis and consultation. A number of these responses were lengthy and detailed, referencing earlier research in the area, including the previous consultation on child poverty measurement that led to the choice of the existing set.

Our main concern is central to the proposal: that a single multi-dimensional measure of child poverty of the kind proposed is potentially damaging to a long standing, thoroughly researched policy area. The current measures used in the Child Poverty Act are grounded in years of academic research. (*Durham County Council; Local Authority*)

The four measures published in HBAI were agreed after considerable consultation, and there does not seem to be a compelling reason to replace them. (*Centre for Longitudinal Studies; Academic/Think tank*)

The document seeks to discredit the current measures, but fails to make a convincing or well-evidenced case... The 60-year history of studying poverty in the UK has recognised the complex interplay between the causes and effects of poverty and has not sought to simplify them in this way. We are disappointed that much of the wide base of evidence that led to the current child poverty measures, the Households Below Average Incomes (HBAI) and the ONS Child Wellbeing data series have been ignored in the preparation of the Consultation. (*The Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reform Church; Other*)

Stop trying to invent a better wheel and use the excellent one you have already. (*Tony Martin, community activist; Frontline Service*)

Many responses also highlighted the importance of the existing measures for international comparisons:

The Manchester child poverty work takes these indicators — of relative and absolute income, combined low income and material deprivation and persistent poverty — as sound. These draw from long and extensive research into measures for child poverty and have international recognition. This is important because poverty is something that the Government is committed to tackle at European and international levels and it is important to be able to benchmark conditions across different states. (*Manchester City Council; Local Authority*)

... Second, of vital importance to the government must be conformity to international norms, so that valid comparisons can be made within the European Union, the OECD and the United Nations. All use a definition of household income relative to the median, and the government should hesitate to make it more difficult for the UK to provide internationally comparable data. (*Royal Statistical Society; Academic/Think tank*)

Some local authorities highlighted the ‘building blocks’ in the Child Poverty Act, and the way these have driven action across dimensions:

The current framework within the Child Poverty Act 2010 describes “building blocks”, which are factors contributing to the environment in which children grow up. In Sandwell we have used income, material deprivation and the building blocks as a framework and our child poverty/anti poverty strategy has the following key strands: financial inclusion, pathways into work and the labour market; services and local economy; building neighbourhood networks. This approach means we

are able to take a multi dimensional approach locally, responding through a child/anti poverty action plan, but still able to compare our progress nationally through the Index of Multiple Deprivation and current measures in the Child Poverty Act 2010 - which enable us to compare our progress with other countries. (*Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council; Local Authority*)

Some responses argued that while the existing four measures were not perfect they were the best available poverty measures. Many of these highlighted the way the four measures operate together, and dismissed the consultation document's focus on flaws in the relative measure:

No measure is perfect. This is why sensible analysts use a range... Sometimes a single measure will throw up apparently anomalous results. This is an opportunity to fully understand and communicate events... That [the] drop in relative poverty between 09/10 and 10/11 can largely be explained by a reduction in median income is a reason for wider concern, as an indicator of stagnant or falling incomes across much of the general population. It is not justification for the relative income measure to be scrapped or superseded. (*Jane Perry; Academic/Think tank*)

The current measures, while not perfect, do not misrepresent poverty when used in combination. Better 'triangulation' of these measures should be considered in the assessment and reporting of income poverty. Replacing these measures, and merging them with the number and range of other measures proposed here, will cloud our understanding of the extent of poverty in the UK and confuse efforts to address poverty. (*Noel Smith, University Campus Suffolk; Academic/Think tank*)

On at least three occasions the consultation document notes at length that poverty, using this measure, has fallen, although the standards of living of the poorest have not risen. This is because the median income has fallen faster than the incomes of the poorest. While this is true, it does not undermine its value as a measure. As the other three measures in the Child Poverty Act 2010 remained broadly steady, it demonstrates the robustness of the current framework. Only if the other measures are ignored can the argument presented go any way to undermining the current child poverty measures. (*The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Methodist Church and the United Reform Church; Other*)

Others also pointed to risks in changing the measures, in terms of the distraction away from policy action; the distraction away from a policy focus on low income; and the damage to our ability to track change over time:

I am convinced that, given the impact of the recession and of the Welfare Reform changes on children across the UK, it is imperative that the focus of UK and devolved governments should be on taking concerted action to

tackle child poverty, rather than again reviewing child poverty measurement. (*Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People; Other*)

Changing measurement of child poverty to look at a number of dimensions will effectively take the focus away from those households that are increasingly struggling for survival based on a lack of sufficient income. From Riverside's point of view, people who may be struggling to maintain rent payments and to retain a roof over their heads may be down prioritised and those from a broken home boosted up the poverty list. (*Riverside Group Ltd, social housing provider; Frontline Service*)

There is no need to redefine poverty. The current definition is satisfactory and is enshrined in European legislation, the UK Poverty Act and the Welsh Assembly's Children and Families Measure 2010. To alter the definition or measurement of poverty would not enable society to judge whether the UK Government has made any impact on the targets contained in the UK's Child Poverty Act. (*Denbighshire County Council; Local Authority*)

Changing the way we measure child poverty nationally is a very significant decision as it removes the ability to track change over time and excludes the UK from European comparisons. (*Association of Directors of Children's Services; Local Authority*)

In terms of supplementary indicators, while many responses were very open to wider indicators, most made it clear that they saw these as providing additional information on the causes or consequences of poverty, the experience of poverty, or as wider measures of children's well-being or life chances, but not as measures of child poverty itself:

While many families have multiple problems such as addiction issues that need to be addressed these problems are NOT POVERTY. It is also unhelpful to confuse causes of poverty, such as unemployment, and consequences, such as debt, with poverty itself. (*South Ayrshire Welfare Rights Centre; Frontline Service*)

Many of the items proposed below for a multidimensional measure of child poverty are consequences of the experience of poverty, others may also contribute to its cause, and yet others are only distantly related to poverty. None, as far as the evidence available, affects every family in poverty except income, the proxy for the command of resources over time. (*The University of Edinburgh; Academic/Think tank*)

Others point out that we do already have measures of wider dimensions:

The existing measures in the Child Poverty Act 2010 measure relative and absolute poverty, income and material deprivation. These indicators are

regularly supplemented with additional indicators such as educational attainment, and health outcomes to give a rounded understanding of child poverty. (*Welsh Government; Other*)

We are surprised that the Government is seeking to change the Measurements of Poverty: the Child Poverty Act 2010 (CPA 2010) already contains measurements; the DWP's annex of Child Poverty Strategy Indicators 2011-2014 from April 2011 contains indicators which include those both in workless households and in work poverty, 18-24 NEETs, low birth weight, child readiness for school, educational attainment, teenage conceptions and young offending rates. (*Association of Teachers and Lecturers; Frontline Service*)

#### *Support for wider child poverty measures in addition to the existing four*

We identify 26 responses that are open to widening child poverty measurement beyond material resources, as long as this is in addition to the existing measures. These responses still tend to see income as of primary importance in poverty measurement, and they tend to reject the idea of a multidimensional measure, wanting to keep data disaggregated. What marks them out from those we have classified as "open to supplementary measures" is that they appear to view child poverty itself as multi-dimensional, rather than wanting additional measures to provide further information on factors associated with poverty, or as wider indicators of well-being or life chances. As both the following examples illustrate, however, the line is not always clear-cut, and we have erred on the side of generosity towards a multi-dimensional outlook:

We agree that better and more nuanced policy approaches to poverty and social exclusion should be developed. We also agree that the interlinked and mutually reinforcing characteristics of deprivation must be better understood and addressed. However, we are concerned to ensure that the issue of income inequality remains to the fore and is not decentred in the process. The new dimensions proposed as part of this consultation risk under-acknowledging the structural roots of poverty while simultaneously conflating causes, consequences and symptoms. We argue, in relation to the proposed new dimensions, that it is important to continue to address these issues separately and avoid conflating them in one single measure. (*British Sociological Association; Academic/Think tank*)

The primary defining factor of poverty is a lack of financial resources. We strongly oppose any dilution of the current robust measures and targets relating to income... and recognise that whilst the addition of other dimensions will allow for a more holistic picture of child poverty, the current income framework should remain as the gateway measure. This will allow for the clearest assessment of child poverty and appropriate development of policies to tackle it. (*Caritas Social Action Network; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

### *Support for changes to existing measurement*

On our reading, there are 37 responses out of 251 that can be interpreted as wanting to see changes to the existing measures. Five responses simply wanted changes to the measurement of material resources: one called for a focus on ‘absolute’ rather than relative poverty; two for a shift to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Minimum Income Standard or similar; one for a better measure of ‘inadequate incomes’ than a poverty line linked to median income; and one for expenditure rather than income measures.

On top of these five, we classify 32 responses as supporting the idea of changing child poverty measurement to include a wider set of dimensions, mostly in line with the consultation document’s proposal of a multi-dimensional measure of child poverty.

We should point out that of these 32 *only two responses explicitly state that they would like to see a change to the measures in the Child Poverty Act*. Both are from right-of-centre think tanks, Policy Exchange and the Centre for Social Justice:

The government should introduce a new measure of child poverty. This should be based on a number of outcomes that reflect the full range of needs that children have, rather than simply measuring incomes. The requirement to monitor and publish statistics relating to this measure should be legislated for in a new Child Poverty Bill. This should supersede the Child Poverty Act 2010 and replace, rather than supplement, the current legislated measures for child poverty and their associated targets. *(Policy Exchange; Academic/Think tank)*

The Centre for Social Justice’s research has identified five key and interconnected features of social breakdown, which we call the ‘pathways to poverty’. These are family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependency and worklessness, addiction and serious personal debt. Through our work we have seen how these pathways create poverty, but how they are also its consequences. As single or one-off characteristics in life these pathways are damaging, but as a combination they create a ‘perfect storm’ in which entering poverty becomes far more likely, if not a certainty. They are foundational to developing a new understanding of poverty and should be central to any new measure. *(Centre for Social Justice; Academic/Think tank)*

However, while not mentioning the Act, there are a number of other responses in this group that are clear that they see child poverty as being about more than income alone, and that they would value a new measure that reflected that wider perspective:

Poverty is not just about low income and claiming Free School Meals. We have children in a rural environment who are really disadvantaged by the ability to engage in social activities and learning experiences because of the geography of their home environment... As long as we continue to measure poverty, particularly in terms of child poverty, based on a purely

financial equation we will not capture an accurate picture. (*Orleton Church of England Primary School; Frontline Service*)

We are in support of the move to incorporate a wider range of dimensions into the measure of child poverty. This provides a more holistic view of the context and the impact of child poverty. (*Dorset Children's Trust; Local Authority*)

There is no doubt that the UK requires a measure of child poverty that better reflects the extent of child poverty in the UK, not just looking at poverty from an income based perspective, but incorporating multi-dimensional measures of poverty that recognize the interrelatedness of the causes of poverty. This is especially needed in measuring the socio-economic deprivation suffered by refugees and asylum seekers...The proposed idea of incorporating both income based measures and multi-dimensional measures such as health, education, debt, housing and family stability into the child poverty measure is integral to constructing a measurement that will enable the Government to deal better with the issue of child poverty. (*Welsh Refugee Council; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Poverty is not a single phenomenon to be defined in income alone. (*Devon County Council; Local Authority*)

Several 'single issue' responses argued (not surprisingly) for the importance of including one specific issue:

In particular we support the inclusion of a measure monitoring a child's (and their family's) access to constructive leisure time and recreational activity. Indeed, a welfare policy that embraces the importance of holidays will deliver significant benefits to millions of parents and children. (*Family Holiday Association; Frontline Service*)

A small number of responses raised specific concerns about the relative income measure, including the way it may give a misleading impression in times of rapid economic change. One believed a wider measure would avoid this. One or two were skeptical about the need for a central focus on income in a welfare state with a social security system:

A multidimensional measure should avoid the pitfalls recently experienced with changes to the economy, where the only measure used shows a decrease in the number of children in relative poverty due to the median income falling nationally rather than an improvement in children's lives. (*Hampshire County Council; Local Authority*)

I shall argue here that though the existence of child poverty in the UK today is not a myth, the official estimates of its extent can be likened to one... Proof of which is demonstrated by the drop in the 'poverty' rate in



2010/11...The real (after inflation) incomes of the poorest actually fell, yet so too did the numbers counted as being in poverty. ... Given the level of financial support the state provides for low-income families, it seems that we should perhaps be looking elsewhere for evidence of child poverty. The most likely candidates are poor housing, poor schooling and poor parenting. (*Paul Ashton, former researcher at the Universities of Liverpool and Greenwich; Academic/Think tank*)

This group also includes a number of responses which fall into this category rather by default: they appear to accept the assumptions in the consultation document at face value, and do not raise objections to them, but do not explicitly express support for wider measurement either. For example, if respondents answered some of the boxes on individual dimensions with ‘important’ or ‘very important’ and did not note opposition to the concept of a multidimensional measure, we put them in this group, although individual comments often indicated that these factors were perceived to be causes or consequences of poverty, or otherwise important to children’s lives, and did not provide clear evidence that they were viewed as *measures of poverty* itself. This rather generous definition of support for change is likely to explain the higher number of responses in our pro-change group than in that of the DWP. These answers to the question on the importance of worklessness as a dimension in a multi-dimensional measure of poverty were typical of this set of responses:

The single most important measure is being in fulltime work and earning a living wage...Work is likely to be the single most effective way out of poverty. Parents’ worklessness can also impact on the quality of life of the child as it has potential to cause, or be caused by, other issues such as mental health issues. It could be linked to other wider issues. (*Buckinghamshire County Council; Local Authority*)

Very important. In addition to its impact on income, worklessness deprives children of an example or incentive to follow through the early stages of their life and may diminish the link between education and employment in their eyes. (*Thomas Hitchings, Teach First Ambassador; Academic/Think tank*)

#### *Reflecting on the DWP’s conclusions on the extent of support for change*

In light of our reading of the consultation responses, the DWP’s own summary of the findings is striking. In their brief analysis of the consultation they draw out five ‘Key Messages’, the first of which is that “there is support for developing new measures” (HM Government 2014, p.95). Elaborating, they write that “nearly 60% of respondents thought that the government should look at new measures of child poverty wider than the current income focused measures,” including around 80% of local authorities and National Child Poverty Organisations. The bar chart representing this labels the nearly 60% group as those who “consider child poverty wider than income measures.” The text further notes that “many [respondents] set out their views on the limitations of the existing measures of child poverty” (p.95).

On the basis of our own reading, we think this is an extremely misleading way of representing the results. For one thing, it is simply inaccurate to say that nearly 60% of responses “consider child poverty wider than income measures.” This figure appears to have been reached by dropping all those classified as ‘don’t know/no comment’, and calculating the percentage of the remainder who were open to any extra measures, whether or not this was in addition to or instead of existing measures, and whether or not these measures were seen as child poverty measures or as wider indicators. On our reading, which separates those who are happy to see new measures as wider indicators from those who see them as *child poverty* measures, far fewer fall into the latter group. Following the DWP approach of only including responses we can interpret (209 out of 251 in our case), we also find that 60% of respondents can be said to be open to additional measures. However, only half of these, 30%, are open to new measures *of child poverty*, with the other half clear that while additional indicators are useful they should *not* be considered indicators of child poverty. Furthermore, many of those who do want to widen child poverty measurement are explicit that this should be *in addition to* existing measures. Even though we err on the side of grouping responses as pro-change when in doubt, as explained above, we only find 17% of interpretable answers in favour of a change to the existing measures.

Second, the conclusion that “many respondents set out their views on the limitations of the existing child poverty measures” is not a fair representation of responses. We find a maximum of 37 responses in favour of changing the existing measures, and it would be a stretch to say that all of these set out their views on the limitations of the existing measures. A number indicate that they are in favour of multidimensional measurement but do not mention the existing measures at all. Several others raise concerns about the relative measure but reveal a lack of awareness of the other three indicators, for example calling for greater use of material deprivation or fixed income measures, like Hampshire County Council: “A new income measurement needs to be better future proofed against fluctuations in the economy and to include material deprivation as part of the measure.”

There are also 26 responses that want new measures in addition to the existing ones, and it may be reasonable to include some of these as setting out views on limitations. Nevertheless, across both groups (‘to replace’ and ‘in addition’) we still find only 31 responses in total that we assess to be advocating change from a position of reflection.

In contrast to this, *146 responses* are clear that they want to keep the existing measures as they are. A number of these responses do discuss or refer to limitations of current measures but are clear that, in their view, the four indicators in combination still provide an effective framework for measurement (see for example the views of Jane Perry and Noel Smith above, both of whom note that no measure is perfect). It would surely be disingenuous of the DWP to include these latter among the responses they count as setting out views on the limitations of the measures. More broadly, given the imbalance in numbers on each side (as well as the more informed nature of many of the supportive responses) it is very difficult to see how the DWP can have concluded that “many respondents” set out their views on the limitations, without

commenting on the far higher number of respondents who set out their views on the strengths.

## **5. Should income remain central to child poverty measurement?**

Given the level of support for the four measures in the Child Poverty Act, it will come as no surprise to the reader that the consultation responses also reveal strong commitment to keeping income central to the measurement of poverty. Indeed, for the majority of respondents – 143 out of 251 (57%) – child poverty seems to be *defined* by a lack of material resources, with measures of low income, alongside material deprivation, perceived to be the best way to capture this lack. This position is represented in the first line of Table 3. For these respondents, income was not seen as one more ‘dimension’ amongst others, but as the very core of child poverty. This view was common right across the sample, although it was more prevalent in responses from academics/think tanks (79%) and child poverty organisations (78%) than in those from local authorities (46%) or frontline services (40%). These responses almost universally advocated maintaining the current income measures as contained in the Child Poverty Act 2010, although some recommended additions to those measures, as discussed below.

Nearly all the other respondents who commented on the relevance of income to child poverty also agreed that income had a role to play. Five respondents (2%) took a pragmatic approach, not entering into the strengths and weaknesses of different indicators, but advocating continued measurement using the existing set in order to allow consistent monitoring. A further 34 (14%) were open to widening poverty measurement but wanted to keep income as a central and separate measure in a multi-dimensional approach, either maintained as a headline indicator or used as a ‘gateway’ measure (discussed below). We group another 28 (11%) as emphasising the importance of an income measure, but advocating the use of a different poverty line, such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Minimum Income Standard or a more vaguely defined basic level of income.

Out of the 251, only twelve responses (5%) appeared to feel that income was currently given too much importance. Ten of these supported continued monitoring of income-based measures, but wanted these downgraded within poverty measurement, income becoming just one dimension among others. Only two responses advocated dropping income altogether. One of these two, from the Institute for Economic Affairs, proposed replacing income-based measures with expenditure-based ones, leaving just one response, from the academic Paul Ashton, indicating a preference for dropping measures of material resources altogether.

Below we provide some more detail on the content of the different groups of responses. We then go on to draw together the extent of support for *relative* income measures specifically, before comparing our conclusions in relation to support for income measures with those of the DWP.

**Table 3: Should income be included in a child poverty measure? Authors' analysis**

<b>Should this be included as part of a new child poverty measure?</b>	<b>Acad- emic / Think tank</b>	<b>Nat. child pov. Org.</b>	<b>Local auth- ority</b>	<b>Front -line</b>	<b>Oth- -er</b>	<b>Uncat- egorised</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes, poverty is a lack of material resources	31	35	27	22	18	10	<b>143</b>	57%
Yes, dangerous to switch measures now	0	0	3	1	1	0	<b>5</b>	2%
Yes, as a key measure (among wider dimensions)	2	4	14	10	4	0	<b>34</b>	14%
Yes, but with a focus on MIS-type measure	0	1	5	0	2	0	<b>8</b>	3%
Yes, but with a focus on living wage-type measure	0	0	1	1	1	1	<b>4</b>	2%
Yes, but with a focus on basic income-type measure	1	0	3	7	3	0	<b>14</b>	6%
Yes, but with a focus on current absolute measure	0	0	2	0	0	0	<b>2</b>	1%
Yes, but not as a headline indicator	2	1	2	3	2	0	<b>10</b>	4%
No, but an expenditure measure should be included	1	0	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>	0%
No, income shouldn't be included	1	0	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>	0%
N/A	1	4	2	11	6	5	<b>29</b>	12%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>251</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Our own analysis of consultation responses.

*Child poverty is defined by a lack of material resources*

The 143 responses in this group almost universally advocated maintaining the current income measures – both absolute and relative – as contained in the Child Poverty Act 2010, although some did make further suggestions for strengthening the measures – for example, adding in a Minimum Income Standard which might be more intuitive for the public to understand, or better incorporating housing costs and quality, through using After Housing Costs poverty measures and/or adding more aspects of housing quality to the existing material deprivation indicators.

For most of this group, a lack of command over material resources is synonymous with poverty:

The ‘root cause’ of poverty is first and foremost lack of income. (*British Sociological Society; Academic/Think tank*)

Put simply, poverty is a condition marked by a lack of adequate resources, and therefore what any measure of poverty needs to capture is the level of these resources. (*Child Poverty Action Group; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Poverty is about lack of money. (*Meadows Advice Group; Frontline Service*)

We would understand poverty to be a state in which a person or family has insufficient economic resources. (*Institute of Health Equity; Academic/Think tank*)

I strongly oppose changes being made to the way child poverty is measured as poverty is first and foremost about a lack of money. While many families have multiple problems such as addiction issues that need to be addressed these problems are NOT POVERTY. (*South Ayrshire Welfare Rights services; Frontline Service*)

Everyone in the debate agreed that income and other measures of financial resources are essential measures. Poverty is a lack of material resources - the definition is the consensus of social scientists all around the world. (*All Party Parliamentary Group; Other*)

Child poverty is lack of access to material resources and the existing Child Poverty Act measures are a well-established suite of measures that quantify levels of child poverty — hence they should remain. (*Matt Barnes, National Centre for Social Research; Academic/Think tank*)

Other responses argue that whilst the experience of poverty is about more than just material resources, income is the only suitable dimension around which to base a measure of poverty as it is the only factor common to all in poverty:

It is clearly the case that broader factors do make a significant contribution to the experience of poverty but at the heart of the issue is income. (*Julie Boardman and Terence Cronin, Newman University College; Academic/Think tank*)

While many children growing up in poverty live in families with multiple problems (e.g. drug and alcohol addiction), these problems are not poverty. Such problems need addressing, but confusing them with poverty itself is not appropriate. Similarly it is not helpful to confuse the causes (e.g. unemployment) and consequences (e.g. debt) of poverty with poverty itself. Income needs to remain the key indicator of poverty. (*Anna Gupta, Department of Social Work, Royal Holloway, University of London; Academic/Think tank*)

Whilst each of the dimensions proposed within the consultation contribute to the overall experience of children living in poverty, they do

not constitute the essence of the cause of poverty, that of low income.  
(*Alliance Scotland; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

A number of responses in this group highlight research they have conducted with the public, which supports the view that command over material resources, with income a central component, is essential to the condition of poverty:

In my small-scale survey participants in the Market Towns Initiative were asked, amongst other things, to define poverty. To summarise: the majority of responses associated poverty with (not enough) money, and poor access to services etc. (i.e. more than just a lack of money — aspects of disadvantage/ deprivation also figure — a complicated picture, but with money central to people’s understanding). (*Gordon Morris; Academic/Think tank*)

From a lack of winter clothing to not being able to afford to take the bus to school on wet and rainy days, the impact of their families’ low income was relentless. This would suggest that family incomes were central to definition of poverty and therefore, any measurement. (*Rys Farthing, based on research with young people in low income neighbourhoods as part of a DPhil in Social Policy at Oxford University; Academic/Think tank*)

#### *No sense in switching measures now*

Five responses advocated continuing to use income and material deprivation as the basis for measuring poverty in order to keep consistent measures in place to track progress over time:

It is dangerous to change the roles part way through comparisons. My instinct is to keep with income as the key measure. This at least allows trend analysis. (*Fairplay SW; Frontline Service*)

#### *Income should remain a central or headline measure in a wider approach*

We placed 34 responses into this group, those who welcomed the idea of widening the way that child poverty is measured, but were keen to retain special status for income measures. Most advocated maintaining the existing approach to income measurement (that is, including both relative and fixed income measures), although for a sizeable proportion we were unable to infer this from responses.

Oxfam is clear that income and relative poverty must remain at the core of any measurement of poverty in the UK. ... Income impacts many other factors – invariably it is a means to more important ends. (*Oxfam; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

The Commission agrees with the Government that “income is a key part of child poverty and who it affects” and that household income must be central to any measure of child poverty. It also agrees that poverty is

about more than just income alone. (*Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission; Other*)

Peabody welcomes the government's recognition that income matters. It is not the only factor in what constitutes child poverty, but it is the most important dimension. (*Peabody; Frontline Service*)

#### *Income is central, but measurement should change*

A total of 28 responses emphasised the importance of income to any measure of child poverty, but advocated shifting the focus to a different poverty line. Eight such responses proposed using the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Minimum Income Standard (MIS) (or something very similar). This was felt to be both less arbitrary and more understandable to the public:

It is important that any poverty measure is meaningful to the public. A 'basic living income' or 'minimum income standard' may not only better reflect what it means to live in poverty in the UK, it may also be a more powerful way of communicating levels poverty to the public than median based assessments. For example a 'basic living income' could demonstrate that 'there are x number of families in the UK that do not have enough income to buy nutritional food or heat their home.'  
(*Liverpool City Region Child Poverty and Life Chances Commission; Other*)

Another group, of four responses, proposed using the living wage as a poverty line. This is essentially the same as a minimum income standard approach, given that the living wage calculations are in practice based on the JRF MIS (Hirsch 2011). These responses did not refer to the existing measures, and as such it is unclear how far they understood them or poverty measurement more generally:

It is important to have measures that set aspirational political goals e.g. prevalence of the Living Wage as standard. (*Children, Young People and Families' Voluntary Sector Consortium; Frontline Service*)

Link to what money is needed to live to a certain standard, e.g. living wage. (*Bristol City Council; Local Authority*)

Finally, sixteen respondents wanted some sort of fixed poverty line, ranging from measures which sound similar to the MIS, to measures based on the existing 'absolute' or fixed income poverty line, to a line linked to the level of social security benefits. Again, it seems fair to say that some of these responses did not display a full understanding of the existing measures, or of the problems that arise in measuring poverty. Few responses referred to the existing measures, and few gave a reason for favouring an 'absolute' over a relative line. Among those that did, the explanation was usually to avoid the poverty line being affected by fluctuations in median income.

An absolute measure of income seems appropriate. For example, 60% of the median income in 2010/11, adjusted for inflation. This would avoid the issue of a fluctuating median rate affecting the number of children in poverty, whose circumstances have not changed. (*City of Lincoln Council; Local Authority*)

Absolute income would not be subject to the fluctuations of the median income measure whereby coming out of poverty can be an outcome while nothing has changed in the experience of the child/family (e.g. this last year when median income fell). (*Buckinghamshire County Council, Children and Young People's Services; Local Authority*)

There is a good argument for moving from a median measure of income to a fixed level of income deemed necessary for providing a good quality of life. This could be updated to reflect changes in inflation/cost of living in a clear uniform way. Such a measure could reduce the fluctuations in levels of poverty associated with a relative measure. It could also be adjusted for known geographical variations in cost of living. (*NHS Wiltshire; Frontline Service*)

For measures of poverty, an income dimension should be absolute and based on the income of household, with some adjustments for the number of dependents supported by the main earners. (*Thomas Hitchings, Teach First Ambassador; Academic/Think tank*)

Income should be measured in terms of what a family can afford for their child — extracurricular lessons, school uniform, books etc, rather than a simple threshold. (*R Tan, Management Consultant; Other*)

In income terms it is only sensible to measure absolute poverty. In effect government already have an absolute measure of 'required' income in the amounts set for individuals and families in setting basic welfare benefit rates. Any measurement of income and poverty must have a relationship to welfare benefit rates if it is to be consistent, after all, is the government saying that benefit rates are below, at, or above poverty levels? (*Housing Hartlepool, Housing Association; Other*)

I think that this review is long overdue. To use relative poverty as a yardstick for measuring poverty is ridiculous... Poverty should measure the ability to buy the basics of life: Food, Clothes, Heating, Housing costs. The measure of poverty should include the fact that most supermarkets do "value" range of food and household items that mean spending can be considerably reduced. Also, there is no end of charity shops offering excellent quality items and incredibly cheap prices. (*Daljinder Dhillon, DWP Jobcentre Plus; Frontline Service*)

*Income should be downgraded – or dropped altogether*

That leaves just 12 responses wanting to downgrade income measures within poverty measurement – or in two cases, drop them altogether. Some of the responses in this



group focus on the positives of including wider dimensions, rather than the limitations of an income measure. We put the National Council of Women of Great Britain in this category, because of their enthusiasm for including measures of additional dimensions, but they still note that “family income levels will always be central to consideration of child poverty”. Similarly, the National Housing Federation wanted to see measures that take into account the cost and quality of accommodation, but underlined the importance of household resources and of income remaining a central part of the new measure.

Other responses are more directly critical of the current focus on income, and spell out what they think these measures miss. The main issues highlighted are the wider dimensions of children’s lives that are not captured; the relevance of family budgeting skills, which are not reflected in the level of household income; and the incentives income poverty measurement may create to focus on short-term income redistribution rather than investment in other factors relevant to children’s lives:

Multi-dimensional income measuring allows for a deeper understanding of the spending of income, not just income levels. For example point 4 on page 20 [of the consultation document] says that, “low income families are five times more likely to say that they cannot afford a warm winter coat than middle income families.” A head teacher reports that while there are fleece lined jackets available in the local supermarket for £12 that are warm and water resistant, the hoodies that low-income families buy for their children at the school are only single-layer, but of a similar price. It may be possible to help to improve the purchasing skills of low-income families. Likewise improved cookery classes can be of particular value to low-income families in demonstrating how to produce nutritious food on a budget rather than resorting to less nutritious and more expensive prepared foods. As the document says on page 21, “Measures of income do not capture this.” (*Association of School and College Leaders; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Income measures of poverty cannot show what it is like for a child to grow up in a broken home, a workless household, or with parents weighed down by serious personal debt. It is these factors which seriously and unequivocally blight the life chances of children and must be central to any measure of child poverty. (*Centre for Social Justice; Academic/Think tank*)

Without incomes sufficient to provide food, clothing, transport to school and work and to engage in many of the social activities that many families take for granted for their children, meeting these needs would be impossible. However, measuring income alone cannot tell you whether education, health care or housing has improved for the least well off children in society. It cannot tell you whether social mobility is improving or whether the money is helping the next generation of children to avoid the need for government support altogether. The current

approach, based on a headline measure of relative income poverty. also incentivises government to focus policy on short-term income redistribution rather than on improving broader outcomes that would improve children's lives. (*Matthew Oakley and Matthew Tinsley, Policy Exchange; Academic/Think tank*)

We also include Labour MP Frank Field in this group, because he is highly critical of the Child Poverty Act's focus on income poverty, although in practice (for pragmatic reasons) he advocates maintaining the current poverty measures, while introducing the 'Life Chances' indicators proposed in his Foundation Years report (Field, 2010):

While the current financial definition of poverty is inadequate, it is difficult to see how best to replace it. The government should therefore park this issue and begin to take action where the overwhelming weight of evidence suggests the government could play a decisive and determining role... Instead of seeking 'the end of the rainbow' in the hope of discovering a readymade definition of poverty, the government should act quickly and decisively in agreeing a set of life chances indicators which should be published alongside the traditional poverty data. (*Frank Field MP; Other*)

All of the responses in this group discussed so far do believe that income measures have a place in child poverty measurement, even if they think their place should be smaller than at present. But there are two responses which advocate removing income measures altogether. For the Institute of Economic Affairs, this is because of the inaccuracy of income data; they propose using expenditure measures instead:

Income should be dropped completely from the poverty statistics. Living standards of the least well-off should be measured by expenditure, not income. Income is a good measure of average living standards, but not of living standards at the lower end of the distribution. This can be seen by checking the correlation between incomes and other measures of living standards. Several papers have shown that at the lower end of the distribution, this correlation breaks down. Income volatility, as well as widespread underreporting of transfer income, have made them unreliable. For example, only about half of the sums paid out in tax credits show up in the income surveys. (*Kristian Niemietz, Institute of Economic Affairs; Academic/Think tank*)

That leaves just one response out of 251, from an individual and former academic, which thinks there is no need to measure material resources at all in a country with a functioning social security system:

Given the level of financial support the state provides for low-income families, it seems that we should perhaps be looking elsewhere for evidence of child poverty. The most likely candidates are poor housing,

poor schooling and poor parenting. *(Paul Ashton, former researcher at the Universities of Liverpool and Greenwich; Academic/Think tank)*

*Is there also support for relative income poverty measures?*

There is clearly overwhelming support in the consultation responses for keeping income central to poverty measurement. Does this also mean strong support for relative income poverty? It is worth reflecting on this question specifically, given the repeated criticism of the relative income poverty measure in the consultation document, which suggests particular concern in government about a relative approach to poverty measurement.

The level of support for the four measures in the Child Poverty Act has already been discussed. Table 1 reminds us that 146 respondents wanted to keep the existing measures as they are, implying support for the relative measure among others. Around half of these respondents explicitly underlined the importance of including a relative measure.

To be poor is not just to lack the resources to buy essentials but lack the resources to buy those things which are considered essential by society. *(Shelter; National Child Poverty Organisation)*

Poverty is not simply a phenomenon relating to the ability to achieve basic standards of living, it actually concerns the ability to participate in the social and cultural norms of a society and these, by definition, are relative. *(NHS Health Scotland; Other)*

Ultimately when we consider what it means to be poor in any society, this is likely to be relative to other people in the population. Standards of living change over time and failure to be able to keep pace with these changes can result in social exclusion....As one parent explained in relation to internet access (which for a long time would not have been considered a necessity), as societal expectations have changed this is no longer really a luxury. *(Barnardo's; National Child Poverty Organisation)*

Relative income is essential as it measures the position of people living in poverty relative to others in the society in which they live at the time. Whilst in the short term it may be affected in rather odd ways by recession or economic downturns... in the longer term it is the most sensible way to measure poverty in an advanced, marketised society such as the UK. *(Fran Bennett, University of Oxford; Academic/Think tank)*

The Union maintains that the extent to which a children and young people's household income falls below that of their peers can have a profound effect on his or her wellbeing and future life chances. *(NASUWT; Frontline Service)*

The experience of poverty for children is relative although this should not be the only measure and an absolute measure is also needed. (*London Borough of Barking and Dagenham; Local Authority*)

The methodological problems with the relative income poverty measure are well known but the case has not been made that it is not a 'good enough' measure. Poverty is a contestable and relative concept. (*Noel Smith, University Campus Suffolk; Academic/Think tank*)

As discussed in Section 4, a number of responses highlighted the way that the four measures work together, and as such were dismissive of concerns about the relative measure being misleading in a time of crisis. One response went further than this to suggest that a fall in relative poverty in a recession is not just a statistical anomaly but tells us something important:

The decline in relative poverty noted recently can be readily understood by the general public with explanation and is understood by many people living in poverty as expressed by the following quote "I don't feel quite so bad about myself now other families are experiencing hard times as well". (*One Parent Families Scotland; Frontline Service*)

Of the 146 respondents who advocated maintaining the current suite of measures, just one was nonetheless highly critical of the relative definition:

The relative definition of poverty results in not only misleading, but farcical outcomes. Take the latest data. There is clearly something very disturbing happening to some poor households which is hinted at by the rise in food banks. Yet the official data records a fall in the numbers of poor... The current definition should be labelled with a health hazard warning when used in any meaningful public debate. (*Frank Field, MP; Other*)

There was similarly strong and explicit support for the relative measure from many of the 26 respondents advocating for additional measures of poverty "in addition to current measures," though there was a little more criticism from within this group, with four respondents of the 26 raising concerns about the relative measure. This includes three local authorities, two of whom point to the recent fall in relative poverty during the recession and one, Hartlepool, to the problem of using a national rather than regional median. The fourth was among the contributors to the All Party Parliamentary Group response, which noted that it is 'absurd' to have a measure under which poverty can fall in a recession. There are also several responses in this group wanting to see a minimum income standard style measure added to the suite of indicators.

What of the 37 responses who want to change the existing measures? Do they want to ditch a relative indicator? Not all were clear on this question, but of those that can be interpreted most were not critical of a relative concept, advocating the inclusion of a

relative income measure as part of a broader multidimensional basket (9 responses) or calling for a switch to a consensual minimum income standard, which is itself inherently relative (6 responses). For some of these the value of an MIS was that it may be more intuitive for the public, while others were responding to concerns about the misleading picture 60% median offers in a recession. All, however, retained a common assumption that poverty is relative. Similarly, one response advocated a switch to a measure based on food and fuel share of income, which can also be interpreted as capturing relative living standards, while one raised the issue of adjustment for local living costs. One interesting response in this category is from Policy Exchange, which supports a measure based on 60% median, but argues that the measure should take account of the ability of adults in the household to work. The Policy Exchange proposal would have the rather bizarre consequence that a family below 60% median income would not be counted as poor if it contained non-disabled adults who were not working, for whatever reason:

We put forward a new measure of child poverty that combines measures of incomes (both absolute and relative) with both an assessment of the work capabilities of the household and a broader range of disadvantage factors that suggest the presence of social poverty. Households where the state provides financial support without the requirement that the parents should either look for work at all, or increase their hours or earnings, should be classed as being in poverty if they fall below 60% of median equivalised household income... Households working above the number hours expected in their claimant commitment should be classed as being in poverty if they fall below 60% of equivalised household median income. (*Policy Exchange; Academic/Think tank*)

That leaves just 13 responses out of the 251 who are clear that they want to move away from a relative income poverty measure. One of these is from Paul Ashton, quoted above, who advocates dropping income altogether, mainly because he thinks state support in the UK is adequate to meet basic needs; this indicates an ‘absolute’ rather than relative concept of poverty. One is from the Centre for Social Justice, which argues that the 60% median indicator is an “unreliable and inaccurate measure of child poverty”, for the recession-anomaly reason, before going on to focus on broader issues with all income headcount indicators (the ‘poverty-plus-a-pound’ problem). Overall, the approach taken by the Centre for Social Justice points to a view of poverty as rooted in the absolute rather than relative circumstances of the household, though not limited to income alone.

A third response in this group, from Kristian Niemietz for the Institute of Economic Affairs, maintains that “...relative poverty lines are not sensible... neither in the short run nor in the long run, because perceptions of what constitute ‘necessities’ do not mechanistically follow median incomes.” His recommendation is that we should not use a single threshold at all but measure living standards of the least well off by looking at expenditure levels at the 10<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> percentile. This indicates support for a move away from a relative approach, as the focus would be on living standards at a

particular point in the distribution, without reference to what was happening further up.

Among the remaining ten responses, most say simply that they think an absolute measure should be given priority, or should be the only income measure included. These responses come from a mix of local authorities, frontline services and individuals (Buckinghamshire County Council, Plymouth County Council, Housing Hartlepool, NHS Wiltshire, Birkenhead and Tranmere Children's Centre Advisory Board, Wingate and Station Town Family Centre, Men's Aid, David Cordingley, Daljinder Dhillon, Teach First ambassador Thomas Hitchings).

In income terms it is only sensible to measure absolute poverty. (*Housing Hartlepool; Other*)

Interestingly, some of these responses throw up the underlying difficulties about defining poverty as "absolute". David Cordingley argues that "income is only important insofar as basic needs can be met" but goes on to include in this "access, of course, to basic tools such as a computer and phone etc". Birkenhead and Tranmere Children's Centre advocate a switch to an absolute income measure, but go on to note that "families locally find that as everyone is poor in Birkenhead, it is slightly easier to be poor here." On the other hand, Men's Aid points out explicitly that "all four [existing] measures are relative measures – even the absolute version", and calls for a truly "absolute" measure based on a basket of goods approach. The implication is that this would be set at a lower level than the current measures, and would be a basic minimum:

We believe that much of the failure to eradicate poverty is due to the 'relative' nature of its present definition and of setting the rate so high, at 60%. (*Men's Aid; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

In sum, we conclude that support is very strong not only for retaining income measurement, but for retaining relative income measures. There is extensive explicit support for continuing to use a poverty line based on 60% contemporary median income, while even among respondents who would like to change this measure, a majority suggest alternatives (such as a Minimum Income Standard approach) which also reveal a relative understanding of poverty. A maximum of 5% of respondents can be interpreted as favouring an 'absolute', fixed income or basic needs approach to poverty measurement.

#### *Reflecting on the DWP's conclusions on the importance of income measures*

Finally, we consider how our conclusions in relation to the extent of support for income-based poverty measures compare with those of the DWP. Our analysis is more detailed and our conclusions go further, but the thrust of our findings are very much in line. (This contrasts to our divergent conclusions on support for new measures, discussed in the previous section.)

The DWP binary division of responses on the value of income measures is presented in Table 4. Of the responses that they classified (and again they have a higher number of ‘could not infer’ than we do, and a slightly higher number overall), they also identify just two responses arguing for the exclusion of income from child poverty measurement, against 213 who thought income should be included. Key Message 2 in the DWP’s published summary represents this picture in a straightforward way: “Income matters and a measure of this should be included in any new measures.” We agree with this, although, as argued, we think the result is significantly stronger: a clear majority of respondents believe not just that income “should be included” in a poverty measure, but that it is central to the very definition of what poverty is. Not covered by the DWP, we further conclude that there is also overwhelming support for continuing to base income measures on a relative concept of poverty.

**Table 4: Should income be included in a child poverty measure? DWP analysis**

<b>How does the respondent view this dimension?</b>	<b>Acad-emic / Think tank</b>	<b>Nat. child pov. Org.</b>	<b>Local authority</b>	<b>Frontline</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Should be included in a measure of poverty	36	39	56	46	36	<b>213</b>	83%
Should not be included in a measure of poverty	1	0	0	1	0	<b>2</b>	1%
Could not infer	3	2	4	8	1	<b>18</b>	7%
Did not comment	2	3	0	11	8	<b>24</b>	9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: DWP spreadsheet released to the Child Poverty Action Group  
(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/foi-query-about-a-consultation-on-the-child-poverty-strategy-2014-to-17>)

## 6. Should wider dimensions be included in a child poverty measure?

The consultation document assumes the introduction of a multidimensional poverty indicator, and is designed primarily to gather views on which dimensions should be included and on how they should be measured. It is clear from discussion so far that support for expanding poverty measurement beyond income and material deprivation was in practice limited in consultation responses, though there was widespread support for tracking wider aspects of children's lives and opportunities *as well as* measuring poverty.

Nevertheless, a minority of responses did indicate support for a broader or different approach to child poverty measurement. As shown in Table 1 and discussed in Section 4, nearly one in four respondents (58 in total) were open to changing or expanding the existing indicators, e.g. happy to have new measures either *in addition to* or *to replace* the suite of four in the Child Poverty Act. For some, though not all, of these, a desire for change derived from a concept of poverty as wider than material well-being.

Focusing largely on these 58 responses, this section begins by briefly outlining reactions to the idea of combining indicators from a number of different dimensions into one composite indicator. It then discusses the reasons respondents gave for supporting change, and views about the coherence of the proposed set of dimensions. Finally, it presents an overview of the strength of support for each individual dimension, setting the scene for an examination of each dimension in turn in Section 7.

### *A composite indicator?*

Many responses assumed that a multidimensional measure would involve a composite indicator, though this was never made explicit in the document. A series of objections were raised to this idea. Criticism centred on the idea that combining several dimensions into one overall number would serve to obscure rather than illuminate, with deterioration in some dimensions potentially being cancelled out by improvements in others as part of a combined indicator. As such, many responses pointed out that individual dimensions would need to be separated out again in order to gain an understanding of in what way and for how many children conditions had changed.

A combined measure is of little use when it comes to measuring progress because, without isolating different items, it is impossible to assess which factor is driving any change... The short answer to the question of how we should measure child poverty is: 'why not add more indicators, but don't abandon the current measures, and don't have a multi-dimensional index?' (*All Party Parliamentary Group; Other*)

Many responses also pointed out that, in contrast to the government's stated aim of avoiding an 'arbitrary line', introducing further dimensions would only increase the need for a subjective assessment of what should constitute child poverty, with



decisions about thresholds and weightings needed to be made across multiple dimensions. Depending on decisions made at this stage, each involving value judgments that might be difficult to interpret within the context of a single combined indicator, the number of children considered to be living in child poverty could alternatively be considerably higher or considerably lower than it is at present.

Nevertheless, there was support for a multidimensional index from a handful of respondents. One of these was Oxfam, who backed the introduction of an index alongside the existing income measures, and pointed to other positive examples that the government could learn from:

Oxfam's experience in development of the Oxfam Humankind Index in Scotland shows that a multidimensional measure is possible - people understand it and do not stop at the headline. Instead they use the headline to track progress over time while looking in more detail at the components of measure to understand the various drivers of change. Oxfam recommends learning from lessons from the construction of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) Multi-Dimensional Poverty Index. This MPI measures acute multidimensional poverty and gauges overlapping deprivations. (*Oxfam; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

#### *Why multi-dimensional measurement?*

Not all of the respondents favouring new measures wanted a multi-dimensional approach. A number still had a concept of poverty based firmly around material resources, but wanted more comprehensive ways to capture this:

Income alone is insufficient as a measure, and it is important to consider 'household economy' models that consider income, expenditure, socio-economic climate (e.g. rising food costs), housing market, assets, coping mechanisms, 'early warning' systems. (*Greater Manchester Public Health Network; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Others among the 58 backed a multi-dimensional approach essentially by default: they did not challenge the idea and engaged with individual dimensions, but did not explicitly state that they viewed poverty as multi-dimensional; these are the responses we grouped in Section 3 as 'implicitly accepting change'. There were also some who were happy to go along with the idea, but did not appear particularly enthusiastic:

Overall we do not object to broadening of the measure as long as the sense of the headline measure being one of income is retained. (*Bradford District Local Authority; Local Authority*)

However, there were perhaps 20-24 responses which set out clearly that they welcomed a multi-dimensional approach because they believed poverty to be about

more than material resources alone. The bulk of these referred to the *experience* of poverty as being wider than material deprivation, or to the need for wider measures to gain a broader *understanding* of poverty. Only a small number of responses, like Caritas Social Action Network and some single-issue responses, argued explicitly that poverty was a concept that applied to other dimensions than the material. One or two others thought that low income on its own was an insufficient condition to delineate a household in poverty and wanted a 'low income plus x' type definition (e.g. Demos). Finally, there were a handful of responses which seemed to support the inclusion of wider dimensions because they had in mind a concept which others may not think of as poverty itself, such as the causes of poverty or the drivers of future life chances.

To some extent, those emphasising the need to capture the broader experience of poverty, or to have wider measures that improve our understanding of that experience, show strong similarities with those favouring supplementary indicators (separate from poverty measurement), but come down on a different side of the line about what a poverty measure should include. That is, the idea that the experience of poverty is broader than a lack of income is very widely shared. What marks out the responses included here is a belief that non-material aspects of this experience should be considered *as part of poverty measurement itself*, rather than as separate information.

Poverty is best construed as a multidimensional concept. People experience poverty as more than a lack of income and other resources.  
(*Robert Walker, University of Oxford; Academic/Think tank*)

We endorse the Government's aim to augment [the income measures] with additional measures that broaden our understanding of poverty.  
(*Oxfam; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

We agree with and welcome the principle of using a wider range of measures to capture a better understanding of poverty in the round rather than based purely on income. (*London Borough of Enfield; Local Authority*)

We also support the principle of a multidimensional measure; we recognise that a single income threshold may miss important aspects of what it means to be poor and therefore should not be the sole measure of poverty. (*The Association of North East Councils; Local Authority*)

An appropriately constructed multidimensional measure including income offers a broader view of the poverty experienced by individuals and families. (*Barnsley MBC and One Barnsley Anti-Poverty Board; Local Authority*)

We are supportive of the move to incorporate a wider range of dimensions into the measure of child poverty. This provides a more holistic view of the context and the impact of child poverty. (*Dorset Children's Trust; Local Authority*).

Hyde considers income to still be the most significant and important measure of child poverty. However, we welcome the proposal to introduce select other dimensions into the measurement as this recognises that, when combined with low income, other negative experiences such as the household's indebtedness, parental poor health, and poor housing can make child's experience of poverty worse. (*Hyde Group, Frontline Service*)

The response from Caritas Social Action Network is rather different, arguing explicitly that disadvantage in other dimensions can be seen as a "form of poverty in its own right". Policy Exchange points to the same idea – that deprivation of any of a child's needs can itself (or in combination) be considered to be poverty. The only other responses that specifically imply this are single-issue responses highlighting one particular form of disadvantage (e.g. the need to include family relationship quality, or access to family holidays).

Poverty is a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted phenomenon, which is not based upon income alone. CSAN supports the expansion of existing measures to aid understanding of factors such as unmanageable debt and poor quality housing, which provide a complement to basic income measures; as well as factors such as family instability and poor parental health, which represent forms of poverty in their own right. (*Caritas Social Action Network; National Child Poverty Organisation – our emphasis*)

The government should introduce a new measure of child poverty. This should be based on a number of outcomes that reflect the full range of needs that children have, rather than simply measuring incomes. (*Policy Exchange; Academic/Think tank – our emphasis*)

The Think Tank Demos is alone in arguing that poverty should be considered to be low income *plus* at least one of a range of other factors:

Poverty is clearly a combination of low income and a range of other negative dimensions associated with this, and should be described as such. Therefore, the 'low income' indicator, if taken in isolation, ought to identify how many people are on low incomes but not in poverty per se. (*Demos; Academic/Think tank*)

Finally, two responses do not seem to have in mind poverty as commonly understood. These two responses support the inclusion of wider dimensions because they are causes and/or consequences of poverty, or because they have an influence of some kind on children's future life chances. These include the response from the Centre for Social Justice, whose work seems to have formed the basis for the consultation document.

NCW approves the many dimensions relating to poverty listed in the paper, and we agree that there are many contributory factors in addition to income which must be taken into account when seeking to provide children and young people with the means to escape the cycle of poverty and deprivation which many of them still suffer. (*National Council of Women of Great Britain; Frontline Services* – our emphasis)

The Centre for Social Justice’s research has identified five key and interconnected features of social breakdown, which we call the ‘pathways to poverty’. These are family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependency and worklessness, addiction and serious personal debt. Through our work we have seen how these pathways create poverty, but how they are also its consequences... As a combination they create a ‘perfect storm’ in which entering poverty becomes far more likely, if not a certainty... We therefore welcome the Government’s inclusion of these indicators in its consultation document and do not wish to suggest any further dimensions. (*Centre for Social Justice; Academic/Think tank* – our emphasis)

#### *A coherent concept for a multi-dimensional approach*

This brings us to the question of what the government’s proposed dimensions are capturing, and how coherent the approach seems to be. Even among those in favour of a multi-dimensional approach, there was considerable criticism of the particular dimensions covered in the consultation document. The central concern, very widely shared, was that dimensions covering a range of different concepts had been thrown together – causes of poverty, consequences of poverty, risk factors for poverty, and drivers of children’s wider life chances. A second, more specific, concern was the shift some respondents perceived towards a focus on factors linked to individual responsibility rather than those reflecting structural constraints and inequalities. Third, some responses also raised concerns about a focus on life chances and investment over a moral imperative to abolish poverty for children today. The quotations used here come from those responses that were open to wider poverty measurement, but very similar comments were made by many of those who did not want to change the existing approach.

We recognise that the experience of poverty is about more than money, but we are concerned that the proposal to develop a multi-dimensional measure conflates the causes and drivers and effects and correlates of poverty and will lead to a de-emphasis of the importance of income. Experiences that are more common amongst families in poverty should not be confused with definitions or measures. (*Citizens’ Advice Bureau; Frontline Service*)

It is also imperative that if the government proceeds to establish a multidimensional measure of child poverty, clear distinctions are made between the causes and consequences of child poverty, and measures of child poverty. A number of factors either trigger or come about as a

result of poverty, yet whilst meriting considerable attention are not necessarily suitable as measures in their own right. Such distinctions are frequently confused throughout the consultation document in a manner which could ultimately be counterproductive. (*Caritas Social Action Network; Frontline Service*)

Multidimensional poverty is not just a set of arbitrary indicators or dimensions... In defining multidimensional poverty it is vital not to confuse causes and consequences. The core dimension is the absence of resources in relation to needs. Other dimensions included should result directly from the lack of resources. Factors that cause the shortage of resources should not be included in a measure of poverty. (*Robert Walker, University of Oxford; Academic/Think tank*)

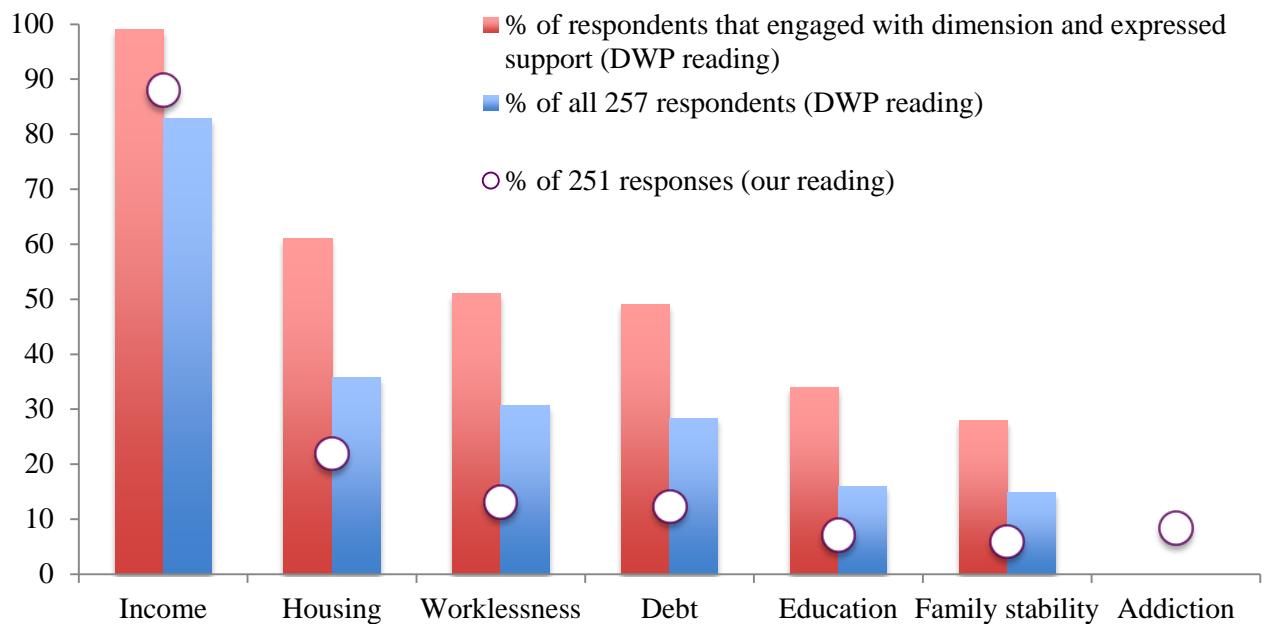
The new dimensions proposed as part of this consultation risk under acknowledging the structural roots of poverty while simultaneously conflating causes, consequences and symptoms... We are also troubled by the way these proposals appear to prioritise child poverty as a strategic rather than a social and moral issue. Many of the suggested new measures deflect attention away from children who are suffering in the here and now and focus instead on future outcomes, on the basis that deprivation is transmitted through the generations. ...The approach proposed in this consultation appears to imply that suffering and hardship endured by children only matters if it can be shown to have long-term implications. (*British Sociological Association; Academic/Think tank*)

Thus while the consultation explicitly states that the final measure may combine indicators of child poverty with 'life chance' type indicators, for the majority of those responding, it is vital to keep the two concepts distinct. The importance of this clarity is also emphasized by those who want to have supplementary measures of other indicators: these are considered useful by many, but we need to retain clarity over what they are capturing.

#### *Which dimensions?*

Finally, how much support did individual dimensions receive? We go on in the next section to look at what responses said about each of the main dimensions in turn, but here we present an overview. Figure 4 pulls together both the way the DWP sums this up and our own assessment. The left hand bars show the percentage of respondents *who engaged with the dimension* who expressed support for including each dimension in a measure of child poverty; this comes from the DWP spreadsheet and corresponds to the numbers the DWP presented in their published response (HM Government, 2014, Figures 6 and 8-11). Measured like this, income has easily the most support at 99%, but measures of housing have 60% support, worklessness around 50% and debt nearly 50%.

**Figure 4: Support for including various dimensions in child poverty measurement (as either individual measures or within a multidimensional approach)**



*NB: DWP provided no measure of support for including Addiction as a dimension of child poverty measurement*

However, the picture looks very different, even using the DWP’s own figures, if we look at the percentage of *all* respondents who support each dimension (right hand bars). Now there is less than one third support for any of the dimensions, with the exception of income. Yet this seems the more accurate way of presenting the data, because of the large number of respondents who refused to fill in the form, as discussed above. We know from cover letters or other answers that some of those who did not respond to particular dimensions were in effect expressing opposition to their inclusion, rather than not expressing an opinion at all.

Finally, the white circles in Figure 4 show our own interpretation of responses. Now the numbers fall lower still. This is because we include only those who said they would like to see these measures included *in a child poverty measure*. Unlike the DWP, we do not include those who were happy to track indicators of these dimensions as additional information, separate from poverty measurement. Interpreted in this way, some 20% of respondents would like to include additional housing indicators, but only 13% and 12% respectively want to include worklessness or debt, with less support still for education, family stability or addiction.

## 7. Individual dimensions

We draw together in this section the specific comments respondents raised about individual dimensions. We look at the six dimensions represented in Figure 4; indicators for five of these – all but housing – are being embedded in legislation or taken forward as part of the government’s “life chances” approach. A number of themes emerge across dimensions: a perceived lack of correlation of some dimensions with child poverty (itself revealing an inherently material-resource-based approach to poverty); concern about a shift in emphasis towards individual failings away from structural factors; and concerns about stigmatisation.

### 7.1 Worklessness

Along with educational attainment, measures of worklessness have been given central importance in the government’s approach to rethinking child poverty measurement, enshrined in the new version of the Child Poverty Act. Yet responses to the idea of considering worklessness an indicator of poverty are far from positive. The numbers are clear in Figure 4: there is some support, with a total of 33 responses advocating the inclusion of ‘worklessness’ as a dimension in a multidimensional measure of poverty, but there is far stronger opposition.

Among those in support, the dominant theme is the importance of work as a source of income. Many simply point to this correlation, suggesting worklessness is a good proxy for poverty as it is traditionally understood, as the inability to participate normally in society due to a lack of material resources. The reason we might want to use a proxy, rather than measuring low income itself, is not clear.

The relationship between low income and worklessness is well documented and should be used as a proxy measure for children living in households with relative and absolute measures of poverty. (*Dorset Children’s Trust; Local Authority*)

In some other responses, like that of the Centre for Social Justice, it is clear that the concept in mind is one that includes *causes* of poverty (or ‘pathways’ in CSJ terminology), making work an important dimension.

For other responses, the inclusion of worklessness is important because of perceived effects on children *other than* through effects on income. These responses make reference to effects on culture and aspirations. These most clearly reflect a multi-dimensional approach, in which parental worklessness is seen as a form of deprivation for children in its own right, for reasons separate from income:

Aspirations of children, young people are lower where no-one is working. Having a member of the family in work is good for the well-being of the individual and the family. (*Hampshire County Council; Local Authority*)

We know that educational attainment and employment give people more than money — they contribute to a belief in one’s own agency and efficacy, to resilience and motivation. In short, they give people hope, even if they were born, or live, in conditions which might lead to hopelessness. (*Impetus Trust; Other*)

This is very important as it will impact upon the child/ren in the family not only in their immediate future but also into adult life as coming from a workless family will make them less likely to work themselves. (*Shelter Bristol; Frontline Service*)

However, even among those who advocate including a worklessness measure, the importance of also recording in-work poverty or of taking account of structural issues is often emphasized.

Worklessness needs to be measured in relation to the state of the local labour market; the skills gaps with the emerging sectors and the barriers to access jobs (e.g. travel to work). (*Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council; Local Authority*)

For the large number who oppose the inclusion of a measure of worklessness, three key themes stand out. First, many responses point out that the correlation between worklessness and poverty is in fact far from perfect. Many highlight the large numbers of children who live in households with a working adult, but still below the poverty line. Some also note that there are those who do not work but that have sufficient resources. A further concern here is that for some households work may not be desirable or appropriate; a focus on the lack of work in these households rather than their level of material resources would be misplaced.

This is a particularly dangerous inclusion — we know that at least 60% of children in poverty are in households where at least one parent is in work. Government policies are already designed to make being in work more beneficial than being on benefits. (*Southend-on-Sea Borough Council; Local Authority*)

Alongside families who are seeking work, this measure would also capture rich families with substantial assets who have chosen not to work — but may be involved in a number of charitable enterprises, families in which the parents have retired early due to ill-health, disability, or redundancy, but have a substantial income from their pension, disability insurance or otherwise, and those who are not exposed to the deprivations of income poverty for any other reason. (*4Children; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

The inclusion of worklessness as a measure of poverty is deeply misleading. Many children live in poverty with working parents. Some households may be workless for good reason (e.g. a severely disabled parent or severely disabled child who needs constant care) — it is



inappropriate to deem these households ‘workless and poor’. (*Bevan Foundation; Academic/Think tank*)

Some of those who wanted information on worklessness to be gathered as supplementary information wanted this precisely in order to be clear about the relationship between work and poverty:

Having reliable information about worklessness that can be used in conjunction with measures of child poverty is very important — not least because it demonstrates that, nationally, a high proportion of children living in households with incomes below 60% of the median income (58%) actually live in households where at least one adult is in work.... Treating worklessness...as though it were an actual measure of child poverty however, would make children living in poverty within working households less visible, but do nothing to improve their circumstances. (*Oldham Council; Local Authority*)

Second, and linked to concerns about the prevalence of in-work poverty, a number of responses suggest that more attention should be paid to other labour market indicators, including low pay and insecure employment. These often point to the importance of structural rather than agency factors. Many of these concerns are also raised by those who are open to tracking worklessness as supplementary information.

We would argue that whilst being in work can bring many benefits to a family, the reality is many people can only access low paid, low skilled and insecure jobs which do little to lift them out of poverty... 34% of our households with dependent children are living in ‘in work’ poverty in Newcastle. A measure of children in low pay households would be more useful. (*Newcastle County Council; Local Authority*)

The inclusion of parental worklessness may be particularly problematic. In Newham a large number of local people work in temporary and insecure work. Many work on zero hours contracts and are unable to obtain all the hours that they want and need to improve their economic situation (*London Borough of Newham; Local Authority*)

Measurements on the on the availability/access to quality work opportunities in localities could provide more useful measures (*The Liverpool City Region Child Poverty and Life Chances Commission; Other*)

If poverty measures are meant to focus attention on constructive solutions, then it would be far more useful to measure sustainable employment than to focus on worklessness in isolation. (*Noel Smith, University Campus Suffolk; Academic/Think tank*)

Rather than focus on the dimension of worklessness, it should focus on an economic strategy that prioritises well-paid jobs because

approximately half of all children in poverty live in families where one parent is working, due to Northern Ireland's low wage economy and rising income inequality. (*Child Poverty Alliance in Northern Ireland; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

We believe that it is important to report on levels of parental employment, as the Households Below Average Income publication does at present. It would be useful to supplement this with evidence on hourly wage levels, including payment of the living wage, for individuals within households. It would also be useful to have a regular series published of the number of parents who are working and are low paid. (*Zacchaeus 2000 Trust; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Third, and related, there is considerable resistance to the use of the term 'worklessness', which is perceived to imply that unemployment is the fault of individuals and risks stigmatising those who are out of work. Some responses present evidence which challenges the idea of a 'culture of worklessness':

In Oxfam's experience most people desperately want to work... To label people as 'workless' in a way that neglects the wider labour market contexts and other necessary infrastructure that facilitates work is in danger of stigmatising individuals and shifting attention away from wider conditions that hinder people's ability to move out of poverty. (*Oxfam; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Whether the inference was intentional or not, the use of the term 'worklessness' connotes a refusal to work. However, recently published research conducted by Teesside University and Glasgow University found very little evidence of the so-called 'culture of worklessness'. In reality, the main cause of parental unemployment, particularly in the current economic environment, is structural rather than behavioural i.e. there simply aren't enough jobs paying a living wage. (*Children England; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

A focus on 'worklessness' as a concept reinforces myths about poverty and agency. Any measure or understanding of child poverty that emphasised this concept would be deeply flawed and would fail to capture the experience of more than half the children who do live in poverty or explore the reasons for increasing levels of in-work poverty. (*Citizens Advice Bureau; Frontline Service*)

In sum, while a small number of responses support the inclusion of worklessness as a poverty measure, because it is correlated with poverty, because it is a cause of poverty, and/or because it is perceived to have independent effects on children's lives through the transmission of attitudes to work, the bulk of responses strongly oppose its inclusion. Strong themes are the weak correlation between worklessness and poverty (because of the prevalence of in-work poverty); an emphasis on the importance of capturing other aspects of the labour market, including the availability

of jobs and the prevalence of low pay and precarious work; and concern about the term ‘worklessness’ itself, which is perceived by some to be stigmatising and to shift the focus of responsibility onto the individual.

## **7.2 Educational attainment**

For reasons that are unclear, the questions on education were structured differently to those in other parts of the consultation. Under the heading ‘Access to Quality Education’ the consultation did not ask for views on how access to quality education might be included in a multidimensional indicator of child poverty (which would have been consistent with other sections), but instead asked specifically about ‘failing schools’: “What impact does attending a failing school have on a child’s experience of poverty?” and “What impact does attending a failing school have on a child’s life chances?” The idea of measuring failing schools within a poverty measure was almost universally rejected. Only a small minority (18 responses) were supportive of including any aspect of education in child poverty measurement, and many of these objected to this being a measure of failing schools. Other responses that were open to collecting additional supplementary information also criticized the concept of failing schools, and pointed to other indicators that might be more appropriate or informative, including measures of individual attainment, gaps in attainment between socio-economic groups, and indicators of the effectiveness of early education.

The 18 responses which were positive about including some aspect of access to quality education in a child poverty measure tended to highlight the importance of education for children’s life chances, particularly for those from disadvantaged families. Some of these referred to failing schools, but several suggested alternative educational measures, including individual attainment measures, value added measures, and early years measures. Interestingly, there are no responses which explicitly put the case that access to a good school is a form of poverty in its own right, although several responses in favour of supplementary information want to see better measures of access to quality public services, as discussed below.

The combination of financial poverty and a poor school can severely narrow the horizons of a child. In addition, for a child living in poverty, a good school is even more crucial as the school can often takes on some of the responsibilities of a parent. (*Centre for Social Justice; Academic/Think tank*)

A range of robust indicators could be used if access to quality education were to be included in a multidimensional measure, including: two year rolling average points score at different Key Stages; secondary school absence rate; and as discussed above, the proportion of children not staying on in school or non-advanced further education or training beyond the age of 16; and the proportion of those aged under-21 not entering higher education. (*Peabody; Frontline Service*)

An education dimension should therefore also consider the pre-school years, 0-5 reflecting the significant impact this has on educational attainment after age 5. We would therefore welcome the proposal to develop an indicator looking at gaps in school readiness as set out in the National Child Poverty Strategy to be used alongside the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. (*Kent County Council; Local Authority*)

The more critical responses have a number of objections to the inclusion of education indicators in a poverty measure. As with worklessness, some responses highlight a lack of correlation between poverty and school quality, again revealing a material-resource-based understanding of poverty. (Using a truly multi-dimensional approach to poverty, these might be considered good reasons *to include* education in an indicator.)

While failing schools are likely to have more poor pupils than other schools, few poor children go to failing schools. (*Robert Gordon University; Academic/Think tank*)

Whilst we acknowledge that attending a failing school had a significant impact on a child it will have impact on children in or out of poverty. (*Hartlepool Borough Council; Local Authority*)

A number of responses think that schooling is a factor that might affect a child's life chances, but is not relevant in assessing whether they are currently living in poverty:

It is very likely (failing school) to be a causal factor of poverty in future years, but it should not in itself be part of the definition of poverty. (*Institute of Economic Affairs; Academic/Think tank*)

Some of the proposed measures appear to relate to the risk of future child poverty rather than the level of child poverty now. An example of this is the 'access to quality education' measure. (*Essex County Council; Local Authority*)

Other responses make the point that "school failure" is more likely where schools have many disadvantaged pupils and that education indicators might be better seen as a *consequence* of poverty:

Schools in disadvantaged areas face a range of challenges that do not apply to schools in average or affluent neighbourhoods, such as staff recruitment and retention, parental engagement and managing a larger proportion of children with learning or behavioural problems. Poor levels of educational attainment and access to further education are also strongly influenced by family income and circumstances. (*NHS Health Scotland; Other*)

The DWP review showed that low-income children experienced restricted opportunities at school, largely through an inability to pay for resources such as study guides and exam materials, and restricted social

opportunities through an inability to pay for school trips and other social activities. Inability to pay for compulsory items, such as uniforms, could also lead to conflict with teachers and disciplinary action. (*Tess Ridge, University of Bristol; Academic/Think tank*)

Following on from these concerns, there is considerable resistance to the use of the term ‘failing schools’ as unfairly labeling schools doing their best in difficult circumstances:

The terminology used in this question is both negative and leading. Many schools that are deemed ‘failing’ are faced with exceptionally high levels of challenge both in terms of the resources available and the ‘raw ingredients’ that they have to work with. The situation they find themselves in is as much a cause as a consequence of poverty. (*City and County of Swansea; Local Authority*)

This question makes assumptions, based on current policies, and reflects unfairly on many schools which, although they may be seen as “failing” in the league tables provide excellent education and pastoral care in the most deprived communities. (*Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council; Local Authority*)

Ofsted itself is concerned about how it would use a measure of child poverty that included failing schools, given that one of their criteria for assessing schools is how well they are delivering for poor children:

Ofsted uses child poverty measures to understand the progress and achievement of disadvantaged children in a school when assessing a school’s performance and to understand the progress and success rates for disadvantaged learners in a college setting. This helps us in assessing the quality of provision. For this purpose it would be preferable that access to quality of education were excluded from the child poverty measure. (*Rob Pike – Chief Statistician, Ofsted; Other*)

As in other dimensions, many responses emphasise the importance of gathering additional information on education, because of its importance to children’s life chances or to their wider well-being, while emphasizing that this is *not* poverty.

Education is an important secondary factor. But poverty is primarily about income. It shouldn't be measured in a poverty measure. It might be measured in a childhood wellbeing measure. (*Impetus Trust; Other*)

Again, we agree that access to education is a vitally important issue but also contend that this deserves to be addressed separately and in its own right, rather than just as a general measure of poverty. Access to quality education cannot be meaningfully converted into a measure of child poverty, but poor achievement is often a symptom of lack of family

income and adequate resources. (*British Sociological Association; Academic/Think tank*)

A child's life chances, as noted above, are not the same as child poverty. The government may be concerned about children's life chances, as explained in its Social Mobility strategy. But that is not the same as how to measure child poverty and should not be confused with it. (*Fran Bennett; Academic/Think tank*)

The 'supplementary information' responses also frequently point to alternative educational measures, including individual attainment, value added scores, and early years indicators, as more promising than a measure of failing schools.

Here in Bradford we track progress in closing the attainment gap between FSM pupils and non-FSM pupils at each educational stage to tell us whether schools and the support services provided to schools by the Local Authority are successful in offsetting the potential negative impact of poverty on children in poverty. These seem to us to be a clear and simple way at present to measure an at-risk outcome for children in poverty. (*Bradford District; Local Authority*)

We agree that the value of a quality education should be included into a measure of the drivers of child poverty. One way of measuring this would be to cross-reference household location against value added scores for local schools. (*Children's Society; National Child Poverty Organisation - our emphasis*)

Access to quality education is a factor for children living in poverty. However, measuring this alone is not enough to close the attainment gap... It is worth bearing in mind that children from poorer backgrounds perform worse than their wealthier peers whichever school they are in — even in outstanding schools. For this reason we believe that education indicators must be pupil rather than school-based. (*Save the Children; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

In terms of life chances, the Independent Review of Poverty and Life Chances highlighted that developing the right foundations starts even earlier than school. Access to good quality early years education can help to mitigate [the consequences] of poverty. This can be measured in part through a school readiness assessment. (*Liverpool City Region Child Poverty and Life Chances Commission; Other*)

Finally, several responses suggest that data on access to and quality of public services more generally should be improved, to give a fuller picture of net family incomes, as well as to assess the extent to which services are available to all:

Measuring the value of public goods is an area worthy of exploration. A measure focused solely on private income could ignore (potentially more

efficient) mechanisms for securing adequate incomes, e.g. provision of public goods. (The rise in the threshold of the Minimum Income Standard as public support for childcare has been reduced is, to some extent, an example of how a measure of adequacy of income can take public provision into account.) (*Royal Statistical Society; Other*)

In our view it is useful for the government to collect better data on the availability, accessibility and quality of public services and to break this information down by income levels. This would allow us to assess the extent to which children from poorer backgrounds are less able to avail themselves of public goods, while also helping us understand the extent to which high quality service provision can offset the consequences of growing up in a low income family. (*Child Poverty Action Group; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

In sum, very few respondents wanted to include education indicators as measures of poverty, and there was strong opposition to a measure of “failing schools” in particular, with some respondents objecting to the very concept of “failing schools”. Respondents who did support the inclusion of education within poverty measurement tended to have a life chances concept in mind; perhaps surprisingly, no respondent explicitly made a case that poor access to education should be seen as a form of disadvantage in its own right, irrespective of later implications. Those that advocated for education measures, either within poverty measurement or as supplementary information, suggested a range of alternative indicators in place of failing schools, including measures of early education (such as school readiness); ‘value added’ measures; and measures of the gap in attainment between disadvantaged and other pupils.

### **7.3 Family stability**

As Figure 4 shows, family stability was the least popular of all dimensions: there were only 15 supporters for including this in a child poverty measure. There was also very limited support for family stability being gathered as supplementary information, with only around 12 further supporters.

Across groups, responses noted that the concept of ‘family stability’ was not properly explained in the consultation, though given that the discussion and questions focused on or implied the importance of two parents, it was generally assumed that stability was referring to a two parent, as opposed to single parent, family. In fact, a large number of those responses which were open to a measure of family stability, either in poverty measurement or as supplementary information, argued that relationship stability was important for a child, but that family structure indicators would not be good measures of this stability.

Among the 15 supporters, there are none which might plausibly be interpreted as taking what we might call a purist multidimensional approach, arguing that not having an intact or stable family constitutes a form of child poverty in its own right. This

response from the St Vincent de Paul Society comes close, highlighting the need for love (but not engaging with whether the proposed indicators are reasonable measures of love):

This is crucial. Children and young people desperately need to feel secure, and to know that their parents are there for them at all times. That old Paul Young ballad about “Living in the love of the common people” sums it up beautifully – children can put up with all the material poverty you can throw at them, but so long as they know they’re part of a stable and loving family then they’ll be OK whatever happens. “Amor” does indeed “vincit omnia” — and conversely, the lack of “amor” is just about the greatest form of poverty you can imagine. (*St Vincent de Paul Society; Other*)

For the rest, those who want family stability measures included saw them as an important causal factor for children’s current poverty, well-being, or future outcomes. The most thorough positive response was, as for other dimensions, from the Centre for Social Justice. The broad concept the CSJ had in mind for its poverty measure is one of drivers, or ‘pathways to poverty’; but their response on this particular dimension suggested a mix of concepts, with family stability seen as a determinant of current poverty, of wider child well-being, of children’s outcomes and future pathways and of social breakdown more generally. (Their proposed measures included lone parenthood; the share of children living with one biological parent; the share in contact with their father; and the number of transitions between different step-parenting arrangements.) Men’s Aid saw a father’s presence as crucial to child development and a factor in a range of future outcomes.

A child’s family lays vital foundations for the whole of their life. Children’s outcomes are directly linked to their family experience and any serious measure of poverty must reflect this...Marriage is no panacea, but when combined with real early intervention, reform of the benefits system, and general couple support, it plays a crucial role in tackling social breakdown... We know that the more transitions [from one de facto step-family arrangement to another] that children have, the more detrimental it is to their wellbeing. (*Centre for Social Justice; Academic/Think tank*)

Without a father’s presence all other measure will be compromised and disappointing. Uniquely a father’s presence affects a) to lower the propensity to commit crimes later in life; b) to reduce teenage motherhood in the case of girls; c) increases educational attainment and d) uniquely performs the “socialisation” process and “rites of passage” that leads to a well rounded citizen. (*Men’s Aid; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

The London Borough of Camden wanted family stability included because it is ‘very important for a child’, but underlined that stability need not mean two parents:

Family stability is very important for a child and therefore is an important consideration in any future multidimensional measure of child poverty.



However, caution needs to be exercised in what is defined as ‘family stability’ and how it is incorporated within any measure. The consultation document puts an emphasis on the importance of having two parents and the detrimental impact that growing up within a lone parent family can have on a child. There is of course a vast amount of research which supports this view but it is not the only solution; stability does not necessarily mean a two parent household. (*London Borough of Camden; Local Authority*)

Other responses made only very general moral assertions about potential links:

Family stability is crucial in measuring child poverty because the family represents the ‘foundation or pillar’ of a child’s future. If the foundation be removed what can the righteous do? As stated in the ‘Holy Bible’. (*Tokunbo Durosinmi, Empower 2 Excel; Other*)

Those who were open to capturing family stability measures as supplementary information but *not* as child poverty measures tended (like several of those already cited) to highlight the role of family structure and family breakdown as potential risk factors or causes of poverty. The Institute of Economic Affairs is one:

The prevailing dogma among poverty campaigners and many social policy researchers is that poverty is exclusively a ‘structural’ issue: They insist that poverty is a product of the capitalist economy, and that demographic or behavioural issues must not be mentioned because that would mean ‘blaming the victim’. [But] other things equal, a society with many low-skilled, young single parents with weak labour market attachments will produce a higher poverty rate than a society in which these variables are less prevalent; and that is not a function of the economic system. The topic of family structure ought to be brought into the poverty debate — but this has to be done in the right way: in discussing the causes of poverty, not as part of the measurement of poverty itself. The measurement and the causes are separate issues. (*Institute of Economic Affairs; Academic/Think tank*)

However, concern about equating a single parent family with instability led to important qualifications being made by this group in regard to the choice of indicator:

It is important to distinguish between the effects of marital conflict and breakdown, and those of living as a lone-parent family. The experience of our members would suggest that the former is more significant at least in the short term. (*Association of School and College Leaders; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

If an indicator around family functioning is to be included, we believe that it should focus on these aspects; levels of parental conflict, the quality of parenting, maternal mental health and perhaps longitudinal measures of the key experiences and transitions that children have over their [childhood]

rather than on a simple measure of whether a child is living with both parents or not. (*Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Academic/Think tank*)

In several cases categorized here, the response simply advocated continuing to record current measures as in HBAI:

Tracking levels of single parent employment and of in-work poverty, as the government already does (through annual ONS and HBAI data respectively), provides a useful indicator both of the risk of poverty and of the effectiveness of policies to alleviate poverty. (*Gingerbread; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

The overwhelming majority of respondents who expressed a view simply rejected recording family stability measures. There were several reasons. First, as with other dimensions, there was a lot of opposition on grounds of lack of correlation with child poverty: responses pointed both to the fact that the majority of children in poverty live in two parent families and to the existence of single parent families not living in poverty.

If we understand it as a family with both parents, then according to the facts ‘The majority of poor children (57 per cent) live in a household headed by a couple’. The lack of presence of a father is also certainly not a measure of poverty. Therefore, it does not make sense to simply take the involvement of both parents in children’s experience as an indicator of child poverty. (*Poverty Journal Club, University of Oxford; Academic/Think tank*)

Some responses argued that where lone parenthood did lead to poverty, this link, rather than lone parenthood itself, was what policy should focus on:

No country can legislate these risks away but instead, need to foster systems that manage and mitigate these risks: countries that do just this reduce the association between poverty and worklessness, lone parenthood and disability significantly. (*Child Poverty Action Group; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

There is a higher risk of child poverty in lone parent and cohabiting families but this is a function of our social policy in the UK - it is not inevitable and some other countries avoid this association. (*Jonathan Bradshaw and colleagues, University of York; Academic/Think tank*)

Others focused on whether lone parenthood was really a risk factor for worse life chances or well-being. Some questioned the strength of the evidence that it was, once other factors (including income) were accounted for, while others highlighted the fact that an intact family (or contact with a biological parent) is not always in the child’s best interest:

Research shows that any negative impact associated with living in a lone parent family is mediated through the income available to the family and not by the family composition itself. That is to say that there is no inherent negative impact from living in a lone parent family; however, there are negative impacts from living in a low income family, which lone parent families often are more. (*Adrian Sinfield, University of Edinburgh; Academic/Think tank*)

There is clear research consensus that, once other factors (including poverty) have been controlled for, family structure does not influence children's outcomes. (*Trust for London; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

In certain circumstances a single parent / carer family could be far more appropriate and functional than a two parent / carer family. Perverse outcomes are possible with simplistic indicators, it is not clear how this would be measured. (*Nottingham City Council; Local Authority*)

Problems also arise in striving to keep families together beyond the point where this is beneficial for the children and parents. There are many different issues that need to be considered in these situations. One of the most serious issues to be considered when looking at family stability is the presence of domestic abuse in a relationship, and the safest way for a family to be supported in this situation. (*Dacorum Borough Council; Local Authority*)

Some responses highlighted that family breakdown can be a consequence of poverty, making it a weak indicator of poverty itself:

Research has shown that income poverty in itself can bring about family breakdown... Six independent studies have been carried out - five in the US and one in Finland - which tested various aspects of the Family Stress Model and the results are quite consistent (Conger and Conger, 2008). (*Sunderland City Council; Local Authority*)

While single parents are more likely to be in poverty than couples, does the relationship break down because of money pressures, or does the family that is split up fall into money pressures? (*Plymouth City Council; Local Authority*)

Finally, as with worklessness and educational attainment, a number of respondents raised the risk that including this dimension could lead to stigmatisation. The NASUWT put this most strongly:

The NASUWT therefore is extremely concerned that the narrative in the consultation document on the family appears to suggest that the structure of families is directly related to their effectiveness in providing an appropriate physical, emotional and social environment within which

children can be raised, particularly in relation to lone parent families. This is highly inappropriate as it not only denigrates unjustifiably the high quality parenting provided in many such households but it also represents a gross distortion of the highly complex relationship between family structures and the risk factors associated with child poverty. (*NASUWT; Frontline Service*)

In sum, the support for tracking indicators of family stability as part of child poverty measurement – or even as supplementary information related to child poverty – is weaker than for any other dimension explored in the consultation document. The few responses in support of including family stability seem to have a concept of child poverty that includes causes of current poverty, causes of future outcomes or simply things that are important for children’s lives more generally. The large number of responses which are opposed to including family stability measures express a range of opinions about why. These include the imperfect correlation between family structure and poverty, and a belief that where there is a correlation, policy should tackle the link, rather than focus on family structure itself. Responses also argue that family breakdown can be seen as a consequence rather than a cause of current poverty, confusing its usefulness as a measure of either; and they challenge the idea that family structure is a risk factor in child outcomes or life chances, pointing out that apparent effects disappear when controls are included for other factors, particularly income, and that separation can sometimes be in the best interests of children. Finally, several responses note the risk of stigmatising some family types if this is included as either a child poverty or life chances indicator.

#### **7.4 Addiction**

Only 108 responses had anything to say on this dimension – fewer than for any other dimension. Of those who did comment, 21 responses indicated that measures of addiction should be included in poverty measurement. Some of these suggest addiction should be included because it is a cause of or associated with poverty as traditionally understood, others that is a factor affecting wider life chances or child well-being more generally.

Parental ill health, especially mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse, could have a strong impact on the family’s income and its ability to budget and deal with other issues such as debt. (*The Hyde Group; Frontline Service*)

Drug and alcohol dependence ruins lives, fuels crime and destroys communities. The impact on a child of an addicted parent is particularly tragic. Consequences can be physical (e.g. blood-borne virus infections), material neglect, exposure to drug use, violence and crime, educational failure and unemployment. (*Centre for Social Justice; Academic/Think tank*)

The detrimental impact parental drug and alcohol dependence and mental health conditions can have on a child and their experience of poverty must be recognised within a multidimensional measure of child poverty. The main reason for this is that such issues and experiences can have a negative impact on the stability of a child's experience and therefore life chances and poverty. (*London Borough of Camden; Local Authority*)

All these issues are important in building a fuller picture of an individual's well being and how this might impact on the lives of children, and other members of the wider family. (*Merton Child and Family Poverty Task Group; London Borough of Merton; Local Authority*)

About 24 responses expressed some degree of support for monitoring drug and alcohol addiction, not as a measure of poverty itself but as a correlate or consequence of poverty, as one possible cause of poverty, or as a separate indicator of children's well-being or life chances.

This is not a measure of child poverty but one potential correlate. We support the proposal to measure [addiction] in order to better understand the relationship to poverty in families. (*Salford City Council; Local Authority*)

Overall, the Commission believes that parental substance abuse is important for Government to monitor but it may be something that is more appropriate to capture in a measure of chronic disadvantage. (*Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission; Other*)

Parental drug and health dependence and some mental health conditions are risk factors in relation to poverty and all can arguably be viewed as consequences as well as causes of poverty. It is important to have robust measures relating to these issues. Such indicators would not form part of a child poverty measure, but would provide important supplementary and contextual information that would be helpful to those trying to reduce child poverty and minimise its effects. (*Oldham Council; Local Authority*)

The most common position expressed, however, is that drug and alcohol addiction are *not* measures of poverty, and that even gathering this information in a way that links to poverty is misleading and unhelpful. In keeping with responses to other dimensions, a common response is that drug and alcohol addiction is not well correlated with poverty. Many responses go further and point to the evidence that alcohol consumption is much more common in richer households.

We fully recognise the greater risks to children's well-being from living in a household where there is parental drug and/or alcohol dependence or mental health difficulties yet substance and alcohol misuse cross all income boundaries. Governments at all levels should be developing and delivering strategies which help support parents with drug/alcohol and mental health conditions and ensure that there are adequately funded

quality services at a local level which can provide tailored support to meet specific and often challenging needs. (*Children in Wales; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

These are not specifically issues which affect children growing up in low income and the policy response to them should be a comprehensive one, aimed at helping all children, regardless of income. We are concerned that in fact an attempt to conflate these particular issues with “poverty” could harm an effective policy response. (*Barnado’s; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Alcohol abuse operates across all sections of society in the UK and is not specific to those living in poverty. In fact, there is real concern at the plight of children living with wealthier alcohol abusing parents who may not come to the attention of schools and social services. (*Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh; Academic/Think tank*)

Unlike with worklessness and family breakdown, a number of responses point out that drug addiction is something that affects only a small minority of families.

While the impact of having a parent who misuses alcohol or drugs is very significant, the number of families with such parents is very small. The recent data from the Home Office shows that 2.7% of families in Britain have an alcohol dependent parent, and 0.9% a drug dependent parent. (*London Child Poverty Alliance; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Linked to this, serious concerns are expressed that emphasising addiction in relation to poverty wrongly focuses attention on individual responsibility, feeding existing myths and stereotypes:

...misleading, divisive and linked to the blame culture... (*Swansea Local Authority; Local Authority*)

[Given lack of evidence that these issues are related to child poverty it is] dangerous to reinforce the stigmatising stories that link these conditions in much public perception. (*Adrian Sinfield, University of Edinburgh; Academic/Think tank*)

...an oversimplification and slippage here... that results in an individualising and blaming culture. (*Jonathan Bradshaw and colleagues, University of York; Academic/Think tank*)

To place these issues together with poverty carries alarming echoes of the Victorian prejudice towards the 'undeserving poor'. (*Kingston Voluntary Action; Frontline Service*)

...feeds from and into a stereotype... (*Church of Scotland; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

In sum, there is very limited support for including drug and alcohol addiction in poverty measurement. Those that do support this have in mind the negative consequences addiction can have on current poverty, child well-being and future life chances. On the other hand, there is strong opposition to measuring these factors in relation to poverty (even as supplementary indicators). Respondents point to the lack of correlation with poverty (in particular in relation to alcohol consumption) and raise concerns – more strongly than in relation to any other dimension – that focusing on this area will feed myths and stereotypes about the role of individual destructive behaviour as a cause of poverty.

### ***7.5 Unmanageable debt***

Among the 122 responses which engaged with this dimension in a way that could be interpreted, there was broad agreement that debt was a growing problem. This did not, however, translate into thinking it should be part of poverty measurement. We identified four broad groups: those who would like to see debt included as part of a multi-dimensional approach to poverty measurement (around 31); those who thought it should be included as part of a revised income measure (around 11); those who thought it should not be part of poverty measurement but could be recorded as supplementary information (38); and those who simply rejected the concept as a bad measure of poverty, often also raising concerns about stigmatisation (42). Among all groups, including those in support of a debt measure, the difficulty of measuring unmanageable debt in a way which is meaningful was raised repeatedly.

There were 31 responses which thought an indicator relating to debt should be included in child poverty measurement. For many, the reason was because it affected the actual level of household disposable income, making recorded household income a misleading indicator of children's material circumstances. Some also argued that the pressure of debt could affect other important factors such as employment and family stability.

Hyde strongly feels that unmanageable debt should be one of the key elements of the new multidimensional measure. It reduces the household's disposable income, causes to accumulating further debt, leads to stress and anxiety and reduces ability to seek employment. (*The Hyde Group; Frontline Service*)

Unmanageable debt is a particular problem for low income families...Servicing these debts can leave families with insufficient income to meet their children's most basic needs. (*Centre for Social Justice; Academic/Think tank*)

Increasing levels of debt are a concern nationally. Capturing the level of debt is important as it provides information on how income is being spent. In addition, unmanageable debt has a potential impact on family stability. (*London Borough of Redbridge; Local Authority*)

However, even among these entries a considerable proportion raised concerns about how such a dimension could be measured, particularly given the use of informal and unregulated sources, including online loans and payday lenders, and give the stigma attached to debt which might mean underreporting in surveys.

The Forum felt how unmanageable debt would be captured overall, is problematic. They felt that the true picture of unmanageable debt and its effects are unlikely to be captured without stricter control by Government legislation, on the methods in which individuals get into debt, for example, pay day loans, voucher schemes. (*Stockport Child Poverty Strategic Board; Local Authority*)

Capturing the impact of unmanageable debt is incredibly important in terms of its effect upon families and can be a visible symptom of a family with child poverty issues. However, measuring this could be problematic as there is significant stigma attached to it. Use of loan sharks or gambling may be visible signs but there is a proliferation of online loaning which are more often overlooked. (*London Borough of Enfield; Local Authority*)

A further 11 responses felt debt should be included as part of a revised income measure; these did not want a multi-dimensional approach but agreed with those above that debt affected the true level of disposable income so needed to be taken into account in income measures. Again though, concerns about measurement were raised:

There may be some merit to including information about unsecured household debt within measures of child poverty (effectively, the argument would be the same as that for taking cash savings and shares into consideration as assets). This would, however, carry a high risk of conflating both future risks of poverty and impacts of poverty with poverty measures themselves. We think further consideration and technical advice about how to do so would be needed before taking such a decision. (*Oldham Council; Local Authority*)

Our third group thought debt should be measured as a potential risk factor for poverty, or as a way of gaining a greater understanding of the relationship between debt and poverty.

It is suggested that debt is not a good 'measure' of poverty, as unmanageable debt can be experienced by households across various income brackets. However, it is still useful to monitor debt as a 'risk factor' as we know that families in poverty are at greater risk of indebtedness due to factors such as the poverty premium and marketing exclusion. (*Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council; Local Authority*)



Several responses pointed out that debt is an indicator of families having insufficient income to meet their needs, and argued that material deprivation indicators are better at capturing this, but also thought measures of debt may add something to the picture:

What ultimately matters is whether the child [family] is deprived and a deprivation index does that job better than debt being a dimension in your new index. However, it may be worth adding more debt/financial stress indicators alongside the deprivation measures as part of a wider indicator of subjective poverty, as in EU SILC use of 'difficulties making ends meet'. (*Jonathan Bradshaw and colleagues, University of York; Academic/Think tank*)

Again, measurement issues were raised, given reluctance around reporting, and the very different interest rates on different debts. Positive suggestions put forward included access to affordable credit (meaning loans at a 'reasonable' rate of interest), and an indicator of debt repayments as a proportion of household income.

Finally, the largest group comprised those who restricted their responses to setting out their opposition to including debt as a measure of poverty. As with other domains, a key reason was the weak correlation in practice between poverty and debt.

What is unmanageable debt is, as every banker knows, the comparison between any level of income and borrowing, and thus equally a problem right across the income spectrum. It is ridiculous to suggest unmanageable debt is something which defines only people in poverty. (*Professor John-Veit Wilson, Newcastle University; Academic/Think tank*)

Many responses argued that debt is better seen as a consequence of poverty, rather than a measure of poverty itself. These respondents emphasised that insufficient command of resources must remain central to a poverty measure.

By definition a debt is unmanageable because you have insufficient income to cover repayments. For people in poverty it is the insufficient income part that is important. (*Leicester Child Poverty Commission; Local Authority*)

Unmanageable debt is not restricted to those living in poverty. But for many it is a severe and crippling consequence of poverty. It is not a measure of poverty but an outcome of having insufficient income to service debt. (*Tess Ridge, University of Bristol; Academic/Think tank*)

One such argument came from a researcher cited by the government in the consultation document:

The debt to which the government refer in its consultation document comes from my previous research... This research showed that families'

insufficient command of resources due to inadequate income resulted in them using non-standard credit, such as doorstep lenders and pay-per-view TV, to meet socially-defined minimum living standards for social inclusion, such as buying Christmas presents and birthday presents for their children. The excruciatingly high interest associated with such non-standard borrowing led their debts to spiral in other areas such as utility bills.... [T]his is a consequence and not a cause of poverty. (*Morag Treanor, Centre for Research on Families and Relationships; Academic/Think tank*)

Once again, measurement is highlighted:

It seems unlikely that an accurate measure of current experience of unmanageable debt would be possible. Historical poor credit history would not necessarily capture this effectively and it would miss out those who are most vulnerable but using less mainstream lending routes such as pawn shops and illegal money lenders. (*NHS Wiltshire; Frontline Service*)

Several responses objected to the term ‘unmanageable debt’ on the basis that it shifts responsibility onto those in poverty for being unable to manage their situation – money management, rather than shortage of resources, becomes the focus:

Unmanageable debt seems to imply that if families could manage their finances better then poverty would not be an issue, which is not the case. (*Middlesborough Children and Young People’s Trust; Frontline Service*)

There is also very good evidence that people on low-incomes are very effective at managing their money; the problem is that they often don’t have enough money to be able to achieve an adequate living standard without looking to borrow extra money. A dimension of ‘unmanageable debt’ may lead people to believe that if only people on low incomes could ‘manage’ their money better, then poverty could easily be eradicated and this would not be a helpful development. (*North East Child Poverty Commission; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

To sum up, the debt domain is rather different to others discussed so far in that capturing debt is seen by many as a way of getting a more accurate indicator of disposable household resources, rather than as a separate domain in its own right. Nevertheless, concerns are raised across the board about how to capture debt accurately: measurement issues are raised more frequently here than in relation to any other domain. There is also a strong body of opinion opposed to using debt as a poverty measure. Many of these responses argue that debt is a consequence of a household having inadequate resources to meet their needs, and that the inadequacy of resources must be the focus of a poverty measure, not debt. There is also concern that the term ‘unmanageable debt’ shifts assumptions regarding responsibility to the

household, implying that financial education might be sufficient to address the problem.

## **7.6 Housing**

As Figure 4 suggests, the reaction to including indicators of housing, either within a poverty measure, or as supplementary information, was more positive than for any other domain. Of the 152 responses that could be categorised, only 15 did not express support for measuring aspects of housing. However, most respondents believed housing measures were important because of the impact of poor housing on children's wider well-being or development, or because poor housing can be part of the experience of poverty, not as measures of poverty itself.

There were 55 responses that indicated that housing should be included within a multi-dimensional poverty measure (or at least, said it should be measured, and did not explicitly object to this being as part of a poverty measure). As in other domains, this group of responses reflected a range of understandings about what a child poverty measure should include. Only two responses indicated that access to decent housing should be seen as a necessity in its own right, reflecting what we might think of as a genuinely multi-dimensional approach to poverty:

A warm and safe home is a fundamental necessity in life, making this a priority indicator for poverty. (*Liverpool City Region Child Poverty and Life Chances Commission; Other*)

Poor housing is an important factor in measuring child poverty, and decent housing is a basic human right. (*St Vincent de Paul Society; Other*)

For a few others, housing was important because it mediated the relationship between low income and material living standards – either protecting households (in the case of social housing) or becoming part of the experience of poverty, or even pushing households into poverty where costs were high.

Social housing does, in part, shield poor families from deeper poverty and social housing tends to be in relatively good condition overall. There is therefore a case for including poor housing. (*Gillian Smith; Academic/Think tank*)

Vital in any multi-dimensional measure as it is intrinsically linked to a family's resource and is a fundamental aspect of living in poverty. (*Kent County Council; Local Authority*)

Poor housing can generate significant costs for a household... This can potentially move a family below the poverty threshold and is therefore an important factor in understanding poverty. Recent research locally with children put Housing at the top of their list in terms of issues connected to poverty. (*Children's Society; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

By far the most common responses in this group were those who saw decent housing as important because of its impact on children's wider well-being or development.

The impact of housing on a child's development and future educational development is well established, therefore any consideration of child poverty that did not include the quality of housing would be incomplete. (*Zacchaeus 2000 Trust; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Overcrowding is a key factor in child poverty. A child without space is a child that may find it harder to study and relax. (*Stockport Child Poverty Strategy Strategic Board; Local Authority*)

Poor housing can have a significant impact on an individuals and families overall health and well-being as well as affecting income. Generally therefore it is a very important dimension of any multi-dimensional measure of child poverty. (*London Borough of Camden; Local Authority*)

Housing is a key dimension to measuring child poverty. ... housing has become a relevant factor in determining child poverty and health. (*Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health; Academic/Think tank*)

With regards to housing needs, the following are fundamental to subjective wellbeing in children and teenagers; Privacy, Quiet space & feelings of safety at home, in neighbourhood and school. (*Kids' Company; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Safe, warm and decent accommodation is critical to addressing child poverty. Children cannot thrive, enjoy life, play, complete homework and interact effectively with their friends when living in cold, damp, overcrowded, dark and unsafe accommodation. (*London Borough of Redbridge; Local Authority*)

There were a further 84 responses which were supportive of collecting further housing data for very similar reasons to those above, but explicitly stating that it should be measured because of the relevance of housing conditions to child well-being and child development and/or because poor housing could be a consequence of poverty or reflect the experience of poverty, *not* as a measure of poverty itself.

Poor housing is both a cause and consequence of poverty as opposed to a measure. ...The impact of living in cold, damp poorly maintained conditions has a detrimental impact on both physical and mental wellbeing. (*City and County of Swansea; Local Authority*)

Poor housing and rising rates of family homelessness are a clear and devastating consequence of child poverty and should be more carefully measured and monitored, rather than collapsed into a general measure of child poverty. (*British Sociological Association; Academic/Think tank*)

[wants measures left as they are but...] If the government pursues a multidimensional measure it will be very important to include housing as an aspect. Poor housing is a cause of poverty...Poor housing is also a reliable indicator of existing deprivation, with a strong correlation between households living in poverty and those in housing that is damp, in disrepair, non-decent or overcrowded... Finally poor housing has also been shown to impact negatively on children's outcomes and life chances. (*Shelter; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Housing is critical to addressing and improving the lives of poor Londoners. However, poor housing is not a direct measure of child poverty. Children in poverty may live in poor housing - damp, cold, overcrowded housing or be homeless. But many poor children do not, mainly because of social housing (though even this is not always in a good physical condition). (*Trust for London; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Poor housing is associated with poverty, but it is not a measure of child poverty as such. Poor housing represents forms of deprivation which can impact adversely on child development and wellbeing, including health and educational achievement, and as such deserves a place in wider material deprivation measures to complement income-based measures of poverty. (*Jonathan Bradshaw and Colleagues, University of York; Academic/Think tank*)

Growing up in housing that is cold, damp, overcrowded, badly repaired or in an isolated or unsafe area can have a massive impact on children's health and life chances...It is very important to have a robust set of measures of housing and environmental indicators sitting alongside measures of child poverty. (*Oldham Council; Local Authority*)

Only 15 of the 152 responses that engaged with this domain said nothing positive about measuring housing, and this was because they were emphasizing the importance of income, rather than because they had particular concerns about linking housing measures to poverty. This means the housing domain stands out from the others, for all of which there were a number of responses highly critical of measuring the domain at all.

There is a correlation between the numbers of children living in poverty and children living in poor housing. Whilst there is a clear overlap, this experience is not uniform and we do not believe that adding poor housing to a multidimensional measure of child poverty is helpful. (*London Child Poverty Alliance; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Finally, two further points are worth highlighting. First, a number of respondents point out that there are measures of housing quality included in the existing material deprivation indicators, and/or suggest that it could be included (or coverage extended) there.

Several dimensions of poor housing are already included in the material deprivation index used as part of the Child Poverty Act 2010 measures. Other dimensions could perhaps be added to this, e.g. the condition of the house (e.g. whether it is damp). (*Fran Bennett; Academic/Think tank*)

Poor housing is important and should be taken into account as part of the material deprivation measure – not as a separate measure. (*UNICEF UK; National Child Poverty Organisation*)

Second, several respondents point to the importance of adjusting for housing costs, rather than housing quality, and argue for the inclusion in the suite of child poverty measures of an After Housing Costs poverty measure.

Poor quality housing, such as measured in past indexes of multiple deprivation, and the location and neighbourhood of housing are not generally as important as high housing costs. A future measure of child poverty should measure income after housing costs have been paid. (*Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Katie Schmuecker and Chris Goulden; Academic/Think tank*)

In sum, housing receives more support than any other domain presented in the consultation document. Most respondents would like to see a robust and extensive set of indicators on housing quality, and there were no respondents actively opposed to measuring housing in relation to poverty, which marks housing out from other domains, all of which garnered some hostile responses. Once again, though, for most respondents, housing quality is important not as a measure of poverty itself, but as a consequence or manifestation of poverty, or because of its effects on wider child well-being and development. Some responses pointed out that housing quality was already covered in the existing material deprivation indicators, or that it could be included (or expanded on) there. There were also some responses highlighting the importance of housing costs as well as quality, and calling for After Housing Costs poverty measures to be included in the suite.

## Conclusions

There is no reason that the Coalition or Conservative Governments should have been constrained by a Labour Government commitment to monitor and reduce child poverty. The Child Poverty Act 2010 could reasonably be seen as an undemocratic attempt by a government on its way out of office to tie future administrations to its own priorities. The legislation did have cross-party support, but in parliamentary debates at the time of its passage leading Conservatives did not disguise the fact that they disagreed with the poverty measures it contained. Five ‘pathways to poverty’ had been set out by Iain Duncan Smith in *Breakdown Britain* (Social Justice Policy Group 2006); they were repeated in the Centre for Social Justice’s response to the consultation in 2012-13; and they were at the heart of the Conservative Government’s proposed changes to the measures in the Child Poverty Act in 2015.

However, it is important to be clear, and to set on record, that these changes do *not* reflect the way that child poverty is perceived by the vast majority of those studying poverty and disadvantage, or working directly with disadvantaged families, or designing services and support for them. Despite flaws in the design of the consultation document, very clear and consistent positions emerge from the 251 responses we examined for this paper.

The central finding is the strength and breadth of support for keeping income at the heart of child poverty measurement. For the clear majority of respondents, poverty is *defined by* a lack of material resources, with income, alongside material deprivation, seen as the best way to measure this. In other words, for most respondents, income was not seen as one more ‘dimension’ among others, but as the very core of child poverty. This was true right across the sample, reiterated in responses from academics, local authorities, voluntary organisations, churches and frontline services. Indeed, of the 223 responses that referred to income in their response, only twelve felt income should not be considered a headline indicator, and only two of these maintained that income should not be included at all (with one of the two proposing an expenditure measure instead).

It is also clear that poverty is very widely understood as a relative concept, with strong support for continuing to track relative income measures, despite the consultation document repeatedly highlighting the misleading results a relative measure can give during a recession. Even among those who would prefer an alternative poverty line to 60% of the contemporary equivalised median, most favoured a line which is still inherently relative, such as the JRF Minimum Income Standard. A total of around 13 respondents (5%) argued for a more subsistence-style ‘absolute’ measure.

More broadly, there is extensive support for the original suite of measures in the Child Poverty Act. Although the consultation did not ask about them directly, a large number of responses specifically stated that they would like to keep the existing measures as they were, while only 37 responses (15%) indicated (explicitly or implicitly) that they wanted to change them. Among proposed changes were the

inclusion of a measure which could be made more understandable to the public; a shift (as noted in the previous paragraph) to a more subsistence-style measure; and more effective adjustment for housing cost and quality, such as by incorporating better measures of housing quality into current material deprivation measures, and by using After Housing Costs as well as Before Housing Costs poverty measures.

Of the other dimensions put forward in the consultation, the housing measures receive the most support. This may be because housing conditions are seen as a part of a family's material circumstances, and are therefore more likely to be included under the widespread understanding of 'poverty'. (Notably, housing is also the only area not being taken forward in government changes.) As far as other dimensions are concerned, there is considerable support for tracking measures of educational attainment and employment indicators, especially if the latter include the quality and stability of work as well as its existence. However, these indicators are widely seen as providing useful additional information, such as shedding light on causes or consequences of poverty, *not* as indicators of child poverty itself.

On the other dimensions proposed by government – family stability, addiction and debt – limited support sits alongside strong objections. Concerns are raised about measurement, and more substantively about a shift in focus from structural factors to individual behavioural causes, which is seen as pushing policy in the wrong direction while feeding false stereotypes about the causes of poverty and encouraging stigmatisation.

It is perhaps surprising how little support emerges for a multi-dimensional approach. Even among those who do argue for wider measures of child poverty, very few do so from a position that reflects a genuinely multi-dimensional concept of poverty. Only a handful of responses argue that disadvantage in wider domains should be treated as a form of deprivation in its own right. Generally, those who want broader measures appear to do so because they are including in their concept the causes of poverty, or the consequences of poverty, or children's wider well-being or future life chances. Very few responses point to these wider measures as capturing different forms or aspects *of poverty itself*.

Similarly, those who object to including additional dimensions often highlight the lack of correlation with poverty understood as inadequate financial resources. If poverty was conceived as genuinely multi-dimensional, any correlation with income poverty would be irrelevant: the absence of access to a good school, or having a parent without work, or unstable family circumstances, would all be considered forms of deprivation in their own right, and the fact that these circumstances cut across income lines would not be grounds for excluding them. However, for almost all respondents, this is clearly not the case.

The context in which the consultation took place and the way it was framed are of course important here: many respondents interpreted the exercise as a prelude to the downgrading of the income measures, and may have reacted strongly in order to



prevent this. Perhaps ironically, a document which was less leading in design may have garnered more responses open to a truly multi-dimensional approach.

Nevertheless, the extent to which poverty is understood as being concerned with the inadequacy of household financial resources is striking. Additional measures are widely welcomed, but not as measures of poverty itself. Rather they are seen as capturing variously risk factors for poverty, the experience of poverty, the wider well-being of children in general, or factors strongly linked to children's future life chances. Respondents repeatedly argue that wider indicators should be grouped coherently under headings of this type and not mixed together or treated as poverty measures. The conflation of these distinct concepts, many respondents emphasise, will muddy the waters, encouraging a rift between the way that government talks about poverty, in turn shaping wider public perceptions, and the way they are understood by those working to address poverty, its consequences and underlying causes. Others point out that conceptual clarity also matters for policy development: life chance measures, for example, are focused on reducing the risk of future poverty rather than addressing the needs of those in poverty now.

In the event, the Conservative Government pedalled backwards a little in response to fierce opposition to their proposed changes to the Child Poverty Act. The Welfare Reform and Work Act received Royal Assent in March 2016, retrospectively renaming the Child Poverty Act as the Life Chances Act 2010, removing the child poverty targets and strategies, and introducing a new statutory requirement to report on measures of worklessness and educational attainment. The government also pursued plans to go ahead with a range of measures of "life chances", expected to include family stability, addiction and debt, none of which garnered much support in the consultation responses, even as life chance rather than poverty measures. But after losing a key vote in the House of Lords it made the important concession of adding a requirement to publish the four existing child poverty measures annually.

Perhaps this can be treated as a reassuring sign that there is a point in responding to consultations: earlier findings from this analysis of the responses were cited several times in the House of Lords debate, so they did ultimately play a role in discussion and decision. But the government did not make it easy. 257 individuals and organisations took the trouble of responding to the 2012-13 consultation. The Coalition took a year to publish its own summary of the findings, and when it did so the summary was brief, not well publicised, and – our analysis has shown – misleading, over-stating the extent of support for change and for the introduction of wider measures. And yet the Conservatives went on to ignore even this interpretation of findings, which had at least clearly highlighted the extent of support for keeping income central to poverty measurement. There is food for thought here not only about the way experts think about poverty, but also about the way their voices are heard or ignored, even when they have been asked directly for their views.

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