



Making a difference

Tackling poverty – a progress report

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Foreword

Tackling poverty and promoting equality of opportunity lie at the heart of our approach to government; they define our policy agenda and drive our vision of the future.

In 1999 we set an historic target of eradicating child poverty in Britain within a generation, by 2020. We also pledged to tackle the legacy of pensioner poverty we inherited, when one in four pensioners were living below the poverty line.

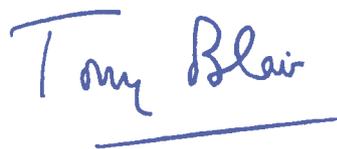
This report demonstrates the huge progress we have made in raising aspirations and breaking the cycle of deprivation in Britain.

As a result of our reforms to make work pay, such as introducing the Minimum Wage and Tax Credits, we have lifted 2.4 million people out of relative poverty since 1997 – including 800,000 children. Measures such as the Pension Credit have helped lift a million pensioners out of relative poverty since 1997, with a 15 per cent fall in pensioner poverty in the latest year alone.

Yet this report shows how much more there is to do. We need to redouble our efforts in the years ahead. Seven years on from setting the target of eradicating child poverty within a generation, we remain absolutely committed to our goal.

To achieve it we must focus relentlessly on the remaining barriers that hold people back in a new drive against social exclusion to ensure everyone can share in the nation's growing prosperity.

We must ensure our economy remains strong and growing. We must continue our welfare reforms to give everyone the opportunity to better their lives through work. And we must press ahead with public service reform to empower individuals and communities so everyone can get the kind of life chances that in the past have only been available to the wealthy.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tony Blair". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Rt Hon Tony Blair MP
The Prime Minister
March 2006

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Hutton". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon John Hutton MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
March 2006

Introduction

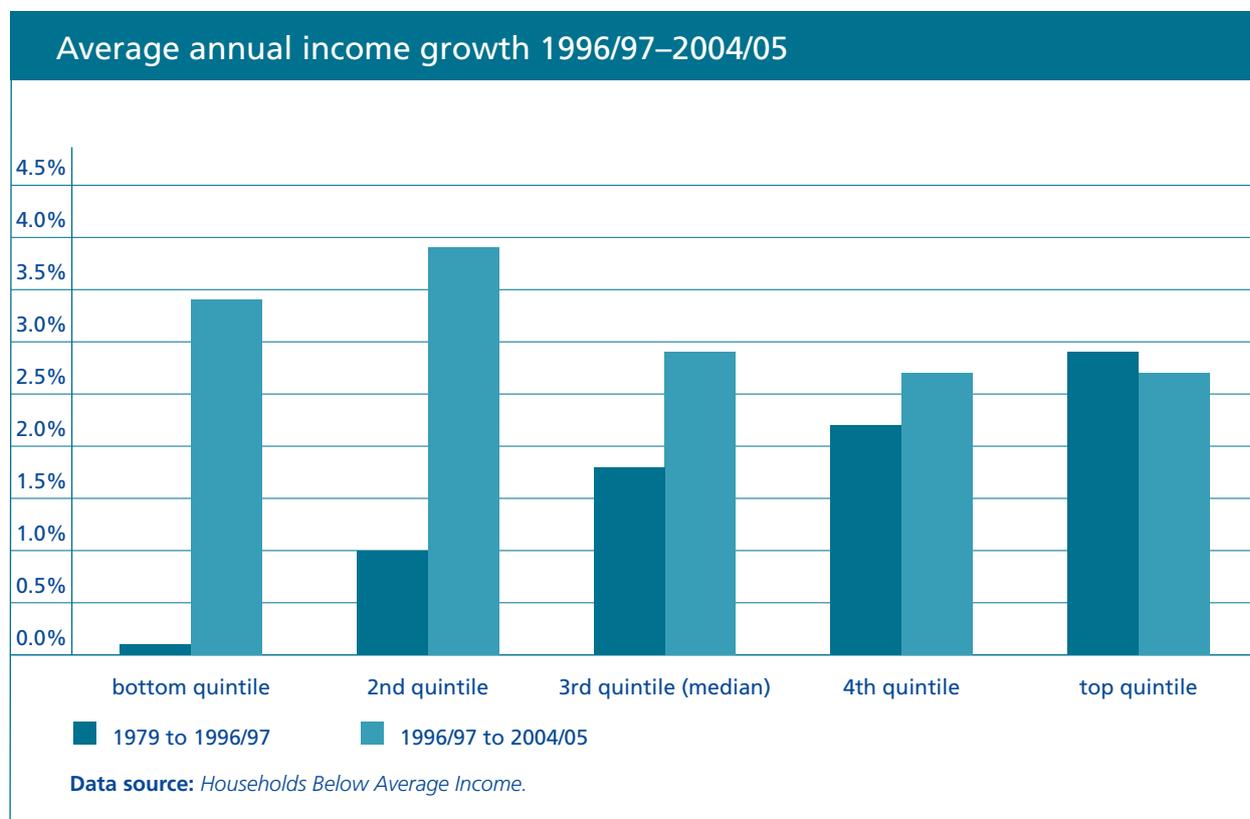
In 1997 there were 4.2 million children living in poverty and there were almost 5.5 million people on benefits, 3 million more than in 1979. Compared with 1979, the number of people claiming unemployment benefits had risen by 50%, while the number claiming lone parent benefits and those claiming incapacity benefits had more than tripled. There were 2.8 million pensioners in poverty – with many expected to live on as little as £69 a week. People had been written off and condemned to a life dependent on benefits. Families suffered inter-generational poverty, with little expectation of work; and communities had become breeding grounds for despair and low aspiration.

The Government has made tackling this legacy a top priority. By raising aspirations and breaking cycles of deprivation, we have made a difference. This report shows just how far we have come.

We are now close to the European average for child poverty, instead of bottom – and we have made the biggest improvement of any EU country. There are more people in jobs than ever before: over 2.3 million more than in 1997. The numbers on benefit have fallen by around 1 million. And with almost three-quarters of the working age population in work, our employment rate is the highest of the G8 countries. Pension Credit has made a real difference for millions of pensioners – with the number of pensioners in relative poverty down 15% in the last year alone.

We are achieving growth with fairness, with incomes growing strongly for all groups. The chart below shows that during the years 1979–97 the poor did not share fairly in rising prosperity, with increases in incomes concentrated on the best off. Inequality in the UK rose faster and further than in any other country.

But since 1997, growth has been far more fairly shared, with the poorer two-fifths actually seeing larger proportional increases in incomes than the better off.



But we have much further to go. This Government is the first to state the radical ambition to eradicate child poverty in one generation, and to set stretching targets to deliver that goal. That we have come close to the first of these targets is something of which we should be proud. Today there are 700,000 fewer children living in relative low income than in 1998/99 when we set out our ambition – 23 per cent fewer before housing costs and 17 per cent fewer after housing costs. This achievement must be the catalyst for us to go further and to step up our fight against poverty. In 2010 and 2020 we must not come close to those targets, we must reach them.

Our approach will be to build on our strategy of:

- targeted support for those who need it most;
- work for those who can;
- breaking the cycle of deprivation; and
- delivering high-quality public services.

This is a long-term approach to deliver long-term change. Not just to tackle child poverty – but to offer every individual and every generation the opportunity and support to raise, and fulfil, their aspirations. As the table opposite shows, we are already making a difference. This report shows we are now intent on going further.

		Then	Now
		1996/97	2004/05
Number of individuals living in low income			
Before housing costs	Relative	10.2 million	9.2 million
	Absolute	10.2 million	5.4 million
After housing costs	Relative	13.8 million	11.4 million
	Absolute	13.8 million	6.7 million
Number of children living in low income			
Before housing costs	Relative	3.2 million	2.4 million
	Absolute	3.2 million	1.4 million
After housing costs	Relative	4.2 million	3.4 million
	Absolute	4.2 million	1.9 million
Number of pensioners living in low income			
Before housing costs	Relative	2.2 million	2.0 million
	Absolute	2.2 million	1.0 million
After housing costs	Relative	2.8 million	1.8 million
	Absolute	2.8 million	0.7 million

Note: Absolute low income: defined here for those people living in a household with an income below 60% of 1996/97 median income (adjusted for inflation).

Relative low income: defined here for those people living in a household with an income below 60% of contemporary median.

		Then	Now
Number of children in workless households		2.12 million (1997)	1.75 million (2005)
Proportion of schools where less than 65% of pupils achieve Level 4+ at Key Stage 2 (11-year-olds)	English	47% (1997)	14% (2005)
	mathematics	50% (1997)	21% (2005)
Employment rates for deprived areas		61.6% (2000)	64.4% (2005)
Proportion of all housing that falls below the set standard of decency		44% (1996)	30% (2003)
Proportion of older people being helped to live independently		7.8 per thousand (1998/99)	11.5 per thousand (2004/05)

Note: Then: defined here as 1997 or nearest available data.

Now: defined here as most recent data.

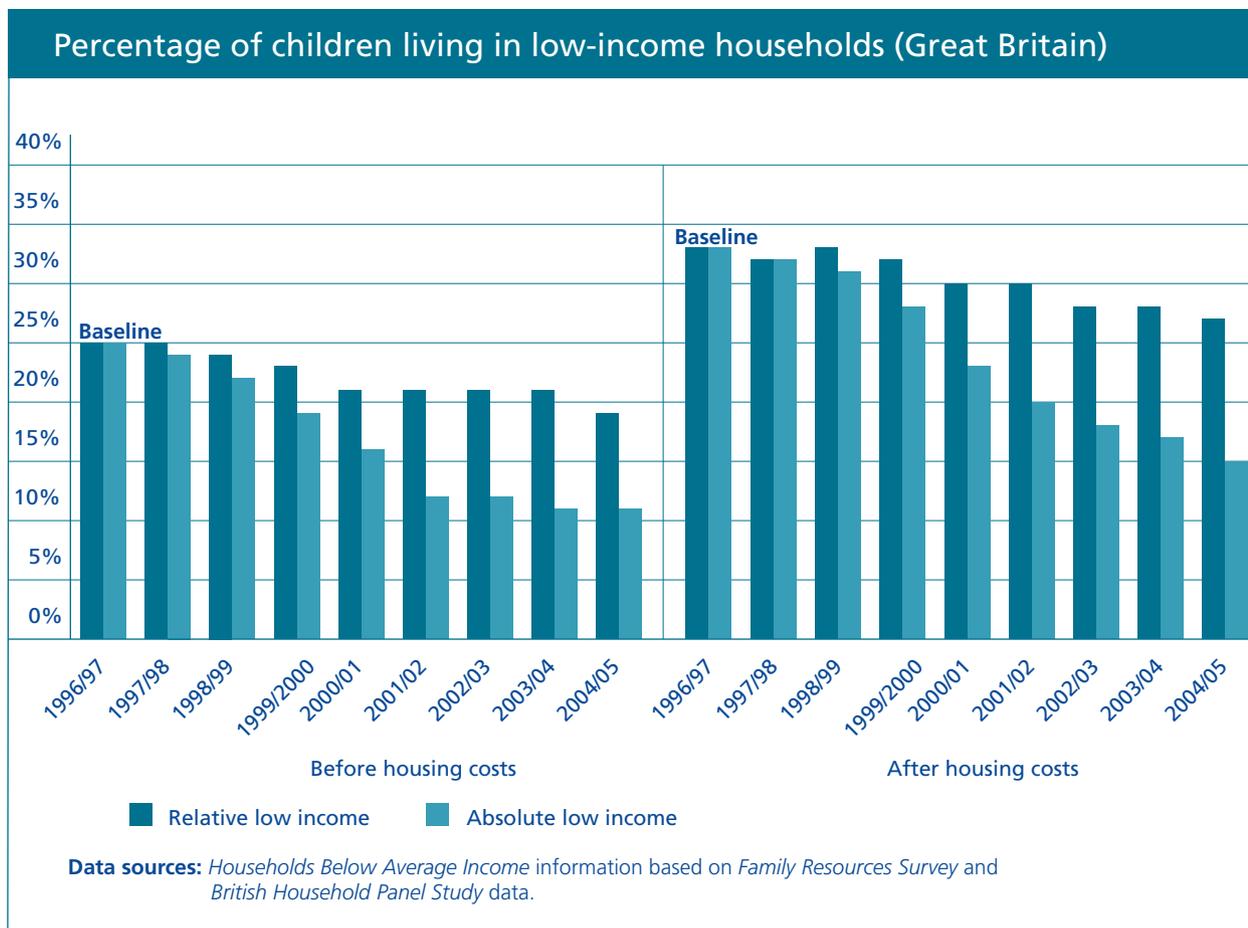
Targeted help for those who need it most

Children and families

The Government is committed to providing financial support for families, with more support for those who need it most, when they need it most. Tax and benefit reforms have rewarded work and increased income for families, resulting in a reduction in the number of children in low-income households.

Progress so far

- In 2004/05 there were 2.4 million children living in relative low income (before housing costs) and 3.4 million (after housing costs), a decrease of 700,000 and 800,000 respectively since 1996/97.
- The number of children living in absolute low income has decreased by 1.8 million (before housing costs) and by 2.4 million (after housing costs) over the same period.
- There has been a substantial decrease in the number of families unable to afford items and activities that many would regard as necessities.
- Families with children will be £1,500 a year better off, on average, from April 2006, with those in the poorest fifth of the population £3,350 better off on average. The evidence shows that this additional money is spent directly on children.



Tax Credits are at the heart of our strategy to tackle poverty. They are currently benefiting around 6 million families and 10 million children, including those families receiving their child allowances through their benefits. Through Tax Credits, 356,000 working families are receiving help with their childcare costs.

More to do

The Child Support Agency exists to help parents take financial responsibility for their children when they live apart. Evidence shows that lone parents experience a lower risk of low income if they are receiving maintenance, regardless of their work status. The payment of child maintenance, either arranged by the CSA or directly between parents, currently lifts 100,000 children out of poverty. But we need to do more to ensure that more families benefit from child maintenance. That is why the Government recently announced that it would invest an additional £120 million in the CSA, to improve the service for clients in the short term. For the longer term Sir David Henshaw has been asked to develop proposals to provide the best possible arrangements for delivering child support.

Promoting financial inclusion is crucial to overcoming poverty. The Child Trust Fund will promote saving and ensure that all children have a financial asset at age 18. Building assets in this way is essential to ensuring long-term independence and financial inclusion, and for breaking intergenerational poverty. Recent changes to the Social Fund, including an additional £210 million for the budgetary loan scheme over the next three years, and the Growth Fund, which supports Credit Unions and other third-sector lenders, will increase the availability of affordable credit to low-income families.



Case Study 1

Helping lone parents

Denise Nicholson

I had been on Income Support for 13 years and as I was on my own with two young children, I thought there was no way to improve our lives. Going back to work seemed really daunting.

I really wanted a job, but I didn't know how I'd earn enough to make it worth coming off benefits. When you're at home all day you have too much time to mope. I'd panic when I left the house and I felt stuck in a rut.

My food budget for the week was around £30, which is nothing when you've got two growing kids. I hardly ever went out with my friends, as I had little spare money, so my confidence was really low and I was quite isolated.

The change in my life came after talking to a woman at a friend's house – she had two children but also a job and was managing on her own. I thought, "That's it. There is hope out there for people like me."

I made an appointment at the Jobcentre in Leyland, and went to meet Barbara, who helps lone parents. Barbara asked me about my interests and hobbies, and I told her I'd always enjoyed arts and crafts.

The very next day Barbara phoned and said that a job had just come in – making decorations out of wire – and she thought of me. I didn't have any smart clothes for the interview, but as part of the New Deal for Lone Parents, I got a grant for a suit, which worked wonders for my confidence. I went to the interview on Friday morning, and was so nervous. I was amazed when Richard, who's now my boss, called me that afternoon to tell me I'd got the job.

I got another allowance for work clothes, and some money to help me make the change from benefits to a wage. Getting my first wage felt brilliant. This was just over a year ago. I was in the right place at the right time.

I bought my first car last month, which gives us more independence. Before, we had to rely on family for lifts everywhere – in fact, we relied on family for a lot of things, which wasn't a nice feeling.

Last Christmas, I treated Ryan and Alisha for the first time without worrying, and at last I can go food shopping without fretting about how much it'll cost. We can afford fresh meat, and fruit and vegetables. Alisha eats lots of apples and broccoli, and loves grapes, which I'd never have bought before.

Ryan's benefited too. During the holidays he goes to a club at the local leisure centre, where some of his fees are paid by my child tax credits. He's made new friends and got loads of confidence. When she's older, Alisha will go as well.

With my wage, Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit, I've doubled my income. I can save money now, and am even thinking of getting a mortgage – a foot on the property ladder, which I'd never even dreamed of.

I feel proud that my opinion at work is valued, and I have real responsibilities. If the company expands I could end up with even more responsibilities, which I'd really love. I'm so busy now, which is better than staring at the same four walls and getting depressed and bored. My friends say that I'm much more confident, happy and outgoing.

My message to people is help is out there for you. My life turned around in a couple of days, and it's fantastic.

Pensioners

The Government has provided additional support for all pensioners, with:

- above inflation increases to the Basic State Pension;
- £200 Winter Fuel Payments, with £300 for households with someone over 80;
- one-off payments such as the extra £200 for help with Council Tax for those over 65;
- free eye tests for all pensioners; and
- free TV licences for those over 75.

Most help has been targeted on those pensioners who need it most. Pension Credit introduced in October 2003 has significantly increased the amount of help available to poorer pensioners.

Progress so far

The Government is spending nearly £11 billion extra on financial support for pensioners in 2005/06 as a result of the measures it has introduced. Almost half this spending – over £5 billion – is going to the poorest third of pensioners. Because of the increase in help targeted at the poorest pensioners, we have seen big improvements in their circumstances.

- Since 1996/97 the number of pensioners on absolute low incomes has decreased by over 2 million, from 2.8 million to 700,000 (after housing costs).
- The number of pensioners on relative low incomes has fallen by 1 million from 2.8 million in 1996/97 to 1.8 million (after housing costs). The number of pensioners on relative low incomes fell by half a million between 2002/03 and 2004/05 alone, the years when Pension Credit was beginning to take effect.



Pension Credit is making a real difference to the lives of over 2.7 million families who are now benefiting from average weekly awards of over £40. Two-thirds of recipients are women; over half are over 75.

Through Pension Credit we have:

- provided a guarantee of a minimum income: from April this year no pensioner should have to live on less than £114 a week;
- ended the pound for pound withdrawal of benefit for pensioners with income above the level of the Basic State Pension, making sure that it pays to save;
- removed the upper capital limit so pensioners with savings can benefit from more generous treatment of savings; and
- abolished the weekly means-test so that Pension Credit awards are set for five years.

More to do

The number of pensioners is rising. There are currently over 11 million people over State Pension Age; we expect this to be over 17 million by 2045. In 1901 there were ten people of working age for every pensioner; now there are four people of working age; by 2050 we expect this ratio to have fallen to two people of working age for every pensioner.

We need to put in place a pension system for the long term which enables everyone to have the opportunity to build up a decent pension and avoid poverty in old age.

The Pensions Commission published its second report in November 2005 – this set out the Commission's proposals for reform of the system. The Government has welcomed the Commission's report, which will form the basis for the next stage of the National Pensions Debate. We need to test the ideas through discussion, continuing to listen to everybody's views in order to arrive at a solution which will stand the test of time.

The Government will publish a White Paper in the spring which will take forward these ideas. The pension system that we aspire to create must promote personal responsibility, fairness, affordability, simplicity and sustainability.



Case Study 2

Pension Credit

Eugenie Hobbs

I'm 83 years old, divorced and live alone.

I used to live in London, and I enjoyed living there. I had a rent-free property, and that enabled me to have a good life. Some years ago, though, my sister had a stroke, and I left London to take care of her.

After she passed away, I moved to Brighton. It was around then that things became difficult for me financially. My only income was my State Pension and a court order from my ex-husband. I soon found that I couldn't manage.

I sold a pearl necklace and a painting that I'd won in a raffle, but then I had nothing else to sell. I loved my flat and my life there, but eventually I gave up the flat and moved in with friends.

A couple of years ago, my health began to suffer, and my daughter suggested I move nearer to her, in Hastings. I felt I had no choice. I bought a little flat in sheltered accommodation, but I was still struggling to make ends meet. Then I heard about the Pension Credit.

I didn't think I would qualify, but people kept telling me that I should apply anyway, so eventually I did. It took six months to get approved, but now I receive £60 a week in Pension Credit, and it has made my life so much better. Now I also have Council Tax Benefit, and if I want to take classes again, I can!

When I was approved, I couldn't believe it – it was wonderful. It made my life much more secure.

I get around so much easier now, because when I'm not feeling well I can afford to take a taxi. Having that mobility enables me to be more active, even though I still have health problems. I'm now vice chair of the Hastings and St Leonards Senior Forum, which keeps me very involved in local issues. We look out for seniors, and we're consulted by local councils on issues of concern to older people.

I know people who have not applied for Pension Credit because they think they won't qualify, and I tell them that it isn't cut and dried. They have a good system for deciding who will receive Pension Credit, and you should really consider applying.

I'm so glad I did. It has made a tremendous difference for me.

Work as a route out of poverty

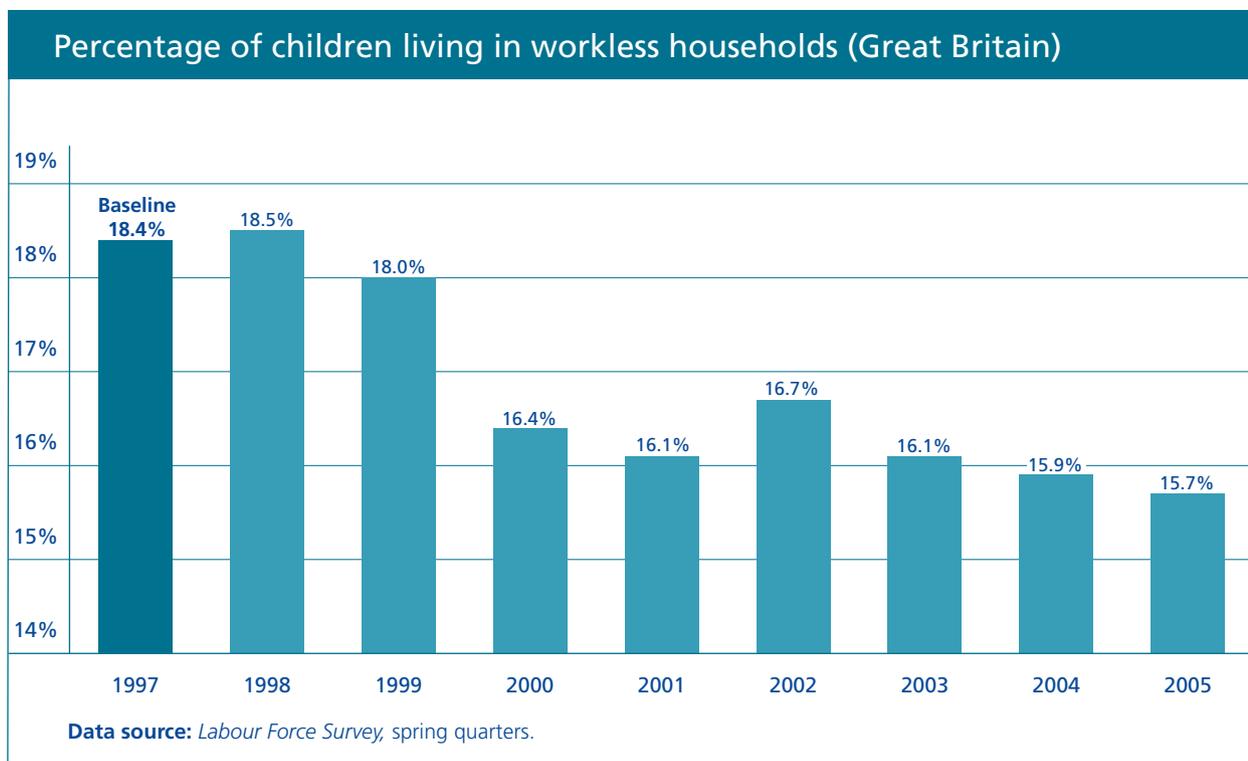
For individuals and families work is the best route out of poverty. It is the best way to achieve economic independence. Work enables family aspirations, fosters greater social inclusion and can improve an individual's health and well-being. Economic well-being for all provides the foundation on which families, communities and government can work together to respond to the new challenges and complexities of modern family life.

There is a clear link between benefit dependency and hardship. Nearly half of children in low income live in households where no adult works. Non-working families are four times more likely to experience severe hardship than those working. Half of the most severe pockets of deprivation in Britain are contained within the hundred parliamentary constituencies that have the largest numbers of people claiming incapacity benefit.

Finding work is the first step out of poverty – changes in labour-market earnings account for roughly two-thirds of exits from low income.

Progress so far

- Total employment is currently at record levels, a rise of over 2 million since 1997.
- The employment rate for the most deprived areas continues to rise, the gap with the overall employment rate narrowing from 12.2 percentage points in 2000 to 9.8 in 2005.
- The number of people on inactive benefits has fallen by around 180,000. Falls have been greatest in the areas with the highest benefit rates.
- There are almost 1 million lone parents in work, 318,000 more than in 1997 and 370,000 fewer children living in workless households.
- Personal tax and benefits changes since 1997 have made 4.8 million working households with children better off.



More to do

We have one of the strongest labour markets in the world; unemployment is at a 30-year low. But we need to provide greater opportunities for people to work in order to meet the challenge of an ageing society.

We want to make work possible for more people and have a long-term ambition for an employment rate of 80 per cent. To achieve this we must help people who are economically inactive and extend opportunities to many of those traditionally assumed to be outside the labour market.

The proposals outlined in the **Welfare Reform** Green Paper build on the principles and success of the New Deal Programmes. A package of enhanced support and incentives will increase employment and extend opportunity for lone parents, older people and those people on incapacity benefits. Together our reforms will go a long way towards creating a simpler, more flexible system. In the longer term we want to go further. Our vision is for a single, transparent system, with a single gateway to financial and back-to-work support.

While people from ethnic minorities are achieving success in a wide range of fields and contributing to the social and economic growth of the nation, there continues to be a long-term and damaging gap between the employment rate for ethnic minorities and the rest of the population. Key initiatives to improve the ethnic minority employment rate, such as the Fair Cities pilots, and delivered through Jobcentre Plus and its partners, will be crucial for lifting ethnic minority families out of poverty.

As well as supporting older workers to re-enter the labour market, in October 2006 we will introduce age discrimination legislation covering employment and training. This will mean that employers will not be able to unjustifiably force people to retire below the age of 65, and will have a duty to consider requests from staff who wish to work beyond 65.

We have introduced policies to **balance work and family life**, building on the expansion of early years' and childcare provision through the National Childcare Strategy and Sure Start to deliver universal affordable childcare for 3–14-year-olds and a Children's Centre for every community. The Childcare Bill will place a statutory duty on local authorities to improve the outcomes of all children under 5 and close the gaps between those with the poorest outcomes and the rest, by ensuring access to integrated early childhood services. We have already introduced flexible, family-friendly policies in the workplace that benefit all parents, including increases to Statutory Maternity Pay and leave, new paid paternity and adoption leave, and a new right for parents of young and disabled children to request flexible working.



Case Study 3

Childcare

Gary Powers

I'm 41 years old and live in Shefford in Bedfordshire with my wife Debbie and our six children. Although I'm now working as a Nursery Assistant at Bramley Tots Nursery in Biggleswade, things weren't as good a year ago.

I had been working in double-glazing, but back problems and asthma meant I had to give that up. I spent a year unable to work, dependent on Incapacity Benefit.

It was a hard time. My wife works nights in a supermarket, but six children are very expensive! There's Anthony, 14, Darren, 13, Lauren, 11, Christopher, eight and twins Louis and Luke who are five. With such a wide age range, there's always something necessary like clothes for school. The rent and the food bills were paid, but debts can spiral out of control when you're on one wage.

Children are inevitably affected in a situation like that. We had some minor behaviour problems at school, and they had to accept that there wouldn't be many treats until Dad was back at work.

In the end, it was the children who led me in this new career direction. I have always been very good with children, so when the twins' playgroup needed extra help I offered to become a parent helper.

When Louis and Luke went up to reception class, I could see working in childcare as a solution to my employment problem, so I called into Biggleswade Jobcentre Plus. I had a meeting with Diane Welham, my advisor there. She was very supportive, providing me with lots of information about organisations that could help.

Kam Mathu, the Recruitment Advisor from Bedfordshire County Council, was holding a drop-in service at the Jobcentre Plus office that same week, for people interested in childcare – Kam took me through the options and we agreed that I should attend the Level 1 Getting Started in Preschool Practice course, on working with children aged 2–5. That was a ten-week course followed by a ten-hour voluntary placement. It was very valuable experience and taught me all the basics of working with this age group. While doing my placement at Bramley Tots Nursery, they offered me the Nursery Assistant's post.

I've only been here two and a half months but really enjoy the job, which had an instant positive effect on my own family. Having said that, I'm not earning as much as I did in the double-glazing job, so we're applying for Housing Benefit. Because I work during the day and my wife works at night, we save on childcare costs ourselves.

It's not just our children who benefit from me working at Bramley Tots Nursery. Some parents whose children attend the nursery are single mothers and I notice that having a positive male role model to look up to is vital for these youngsters. It goes to show how important a male figure is in a child's life – especially when it comes to building confidence.

Many men wouldn't even think about childcare as a career, but it's extremely rewarding. If you're a parent yourself you probably don't realise you have many of the skills. I've also discovered that men are in demand – I've had lots of interest from other nurseries and I intend to boost my earnings by moving up the childcare career ladder.

My goals include becoming a Nursery Nurse and I plan to study towards the Level Two qualification in Childcare. I am dyslexic, and will no doubt face some challenges of my own, but I'm determined to succeed, and hope to run my own nursery one day.

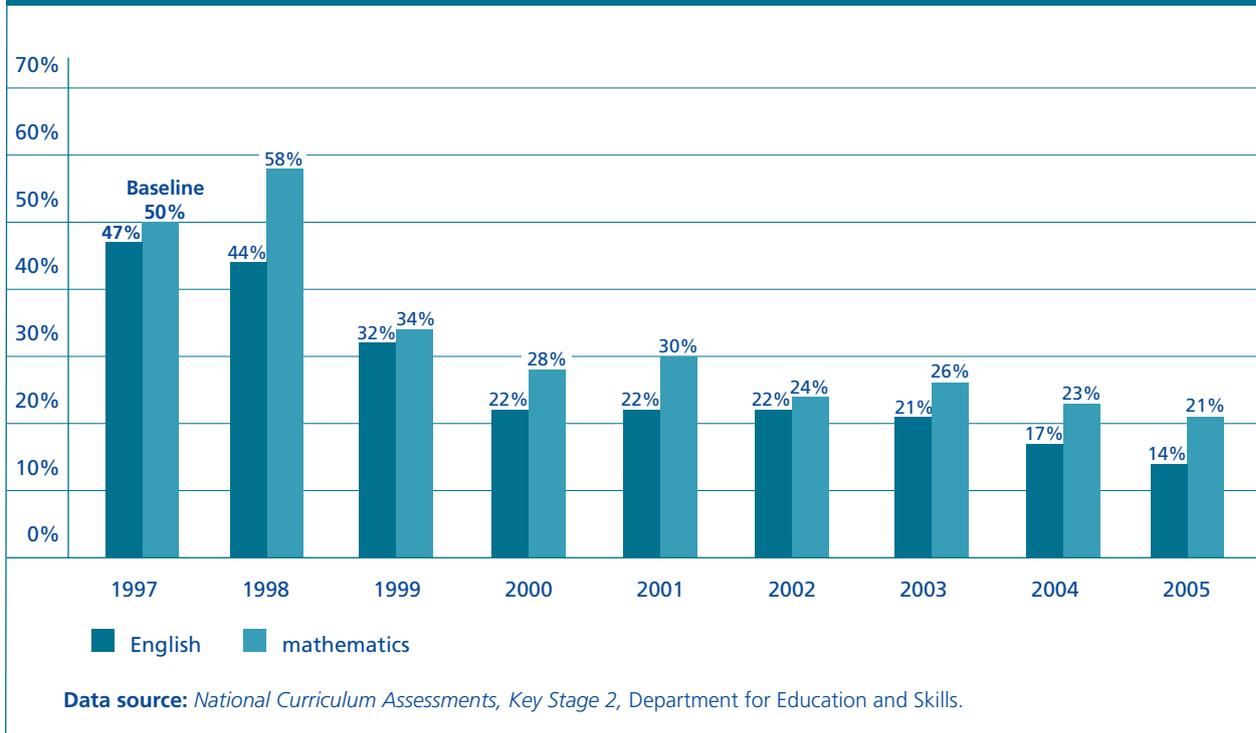
Breaking the cycle of deprivation

Poverty and social exclusion are complex and multi-dimensional problems, so our strategy is multi-faceted in its approach. Preventative policies are critical to breaking the transmission of disadvantage across generations. Providing high-quality public services from the start of a child's life, right through school and beyond, is a key to the success of our strategy. This means nurturing in the crucial early years, a school system that promotes opportunity and effective support in the transition from school to higher education and work.

Progress so far

- Over 400,000 young children and families living in the most disadvantaged areas are benefiting from Sure Start Local Programmes.
- Education results show continuing improvement. There has been a substantial reduction in the number of schools where less than 65 per cent of pupils achieved Level 4 or higher at Key Stage 2 (from 47 per cent in English and 50 per cent in mathematics in 1997 to 14 per cent and 21 per cent, respectively, in 2005).
- Improvements in GCSE attainment have been greater in the most deprived areas. The proportion of children obtaining at least 5 A*–C GCSE grades rose from 34 per cent to 41 per cent between 2003 and 2005 in the most deprived schools, while in the least deprived schools it rose from 69 to 70 per cent.

Percentage of mainstream schools where less than 65 per cent of pupils achieve Level 4 or above in the Key Stage 2 tests for English and mathematics (England)



More to do

Our growing national network of **Children’s Centres** builds on Sure Start Local Programmes and other high-quality early-years’ provision to bring together a range of integrated early-learning, health and parental services and to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of young children. There will be 2,500 Centres by 2008, and 3,500 by 2010 – one for every community.

We aim to **improve educational opportunities for all children** and for them to realise their full potential. As well as raising the standards of all of our schools, we need to make sure that those schools in disadvantaged areas, or those with low levels of attainment, get the additional help they need. A total of £565 million is available within the schools' core-funding settlement for the next two years. This will provide personalised learning and catch-up support, targeted at areas with high levels of under-attainment and deprivation.

Looked-after children are among the most vulnerable in society. The Government is determined that these looked-after children should have the same life chances as any good parent would secure for their child including, crucially, a good education. The Children Act 2004 includes a specific new duty on local authorities – backed by statutory guidance – to promote the educational achievement of all the children they are responsible for looking after. However, we recognise there is more to do. That is why we announced in the recent White Paper *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* that the Department for Education and Skills will be consulting later this year on a wide-ranging set of proposals for transforming the outcomes for looked-after children. We expect to announce more details within the next few months.



Case Study 4

Sure Start Children's Centres

Pam Wood

Kates Hill and Sledmere make up a very ethnically diverse community. In 2003, the Sure Start speech and language therapist screened reception-aged children at local schools to find out their levels of speech and language.

She found that a significant number of the children spoke little or no English and were unused to being separated from their families. Starting school was often very traumatic and was having a real impact on their ability to learn and enjoy school.

At the same time, we knew that many of the parents were struggling with language problems, were isolated and having difficulty accessing basic services like the local doctor.

In 2004, the Sure Start Team launched the Early Start ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) Programme at our Children's Centre, funded through Family

Learning. The main aim was to help the children and their parents improve their English, and boost their confidence.

Sixteen parents and their children attended the first course. We prioritised women with little or no English, who were socially isolated, and willing to attend the course for ten weeks. While the adults were learning English, their children were in our crèche, where there were focused and free play sessions. If we were teaching the adults vocabulary needed for going to the doctor, we'd do themed play activities with the children. Then, after lunch there would be another half-hour session, where the parents were encouraged to really interact with their children.

Initially, many parents would just watch their children play, and didn't get involved. But as their confidence grew, they realised that actively engaging was crucial for their children's development. They took home "what we did today" booklets, developed by the speech and language therapist, to promote parent-child communication outside the course.

One isolated mother came to us with her 8-month-old baby. At the beginning of the course, the child was developmentally delayed, and couldn't sit up or support herself. After ten weeks, the mother had gained a lot of confidence, and understood that she needed to stimulate her child more. Now, that child is achieving its developmental milestones.

We had another mum who had two children aged 3 and 4. When she first came to the course, she had barely stepped out of the house with her kids. By the time she'd completed the course, her confidence had blossomed so much that she signed up for a computer course with Learn Direct, and got her Level One. Her lack of English had been holding her back, and preventing her from doing things for herself and her children. Now, she is in a position to really support her kids, especially their education.

To date, 24 parents have completed the course, and seven are currently doing it. Many of our parents are going on to full ESOL courses, while others are staying on with their kids for "play and stay" sessions at the centre. But all of them are going on to find other opportunities to help themselves and their families.

By combining teaching English with a focus on their children, this course is accessing people we've never been able to reach before. And in the process, it's giving both generations the chance to have a better future.



Case Study 5

Developing Inclusive Practice

Sue Utley

We created The Lambeth Early Years Development & Childcare Partnership's Inclusion Team to help parents and carers of disabled children. Parents wanted their children to have better access to services, and we have helped to make it happen.

Things started to take shape in March 2003 when we began our Cluster Group meetings for managers and Special Education Needs Co-ordinators. These were followed by meetings for parents and carers in April 2004. These meetings help to bring professionals and parents and carers together, and allow them to discuss any concerns and issues around special educational needs and disability.

The meetings have proved to be very popular, with about 15–20 people attending each one. We aim to have ten meetings per year for practitioners and eight for parents and carers.

Each Cluster Group meeting has a different theme. Sometimes, the sessions look at legislative and statutory requirements and processes; others are more light-hearted, and look at practical and fun-inclusive strategies and tools. So far, we've managed to have meetings on themes such as puppet making, music and song, and alternative communication and learning styles. Parents and carers from our diverse Lambeth community attend these meetings and bring a range of views and suggestions about overcoming the barriers they face for their children. Everyone learns something to take home and practise.

Speakers are sometimes invited to give a presentation. This not only enables them to offer their skills and advice, but also to learn about what parents, carers and practitioners really need. Parents and carers share their views and experiences, giving the professionals an invaluable insight into their perspectives.

The parents also find out about children's activities in the borough. One of these is The Play 4 All Project, which helps disabled children to access local play and leisure activities of their choice. The most important thing is that the parents' voices and opinions are heard loud and clear. They influence the planning and development of services.

Everyone benefits from the meetings. Parents don't feel so alone and out in the cold. And the professionals, such as speech therapists and educational psychologists, learn how best to work with the parents. All in all, it's a win-win situation. Some professionals have told us that they have passed on the new skills and knowledge gained from these meetings to their own staff. Others have said that they simply feel more confident in their role as a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator.

Equally, some of the parents have said that they feel more optimistic about the future of their child. For example, some participants have mentioned to me that it's such a relief to be able to discuss issues without being constantly up against red tape. Others are just happy to meet with people and share their experiences and stories. They say it's a real relief from the feelings of isolation they have.

Comments like that make me feel that we are making a real and positive difference for disabled children in Lambeth.



Case Study 6

An Improving School

Rebecca Cummings

When I joined Heartlands in 2004, we were a typical failing school with low academic achievement and very high exclusion rates.

At Easter 2004, we were put into a Special Measures programme by Ofsted. The school had a serious truancy problem, as many pupils felt unmotivated and unchallenged. This led to a lot of bad behaviour which was dealt with poorly.

As soon as the school was put under Special Measures, we had a new headteacher, and a new team of managers with very clear responsibilities. You have to work hard and fast to show school inspectors that you're moving things in the right direction, so we instigated a wide overhaul of policy.

One of the most radical measures we employed was the introduction of an alternative curriculum. Many of our pupils had low aspirations and low expectations of the more

traditional subjects, which, combined with a subsequent lack of challenges from teaching staff, led to boredom and disruption.

Our alternative curriculum is built around subjects like motor mechanics, construction and hair and beauty, with a vocational placement in return for better school attendance and better behaviour. This policy has worked really well for one boy in particular. He had got into a lot of trouble both in school and outside, and had a very bad attendance record, but a great interest in construction. As he is actually very bright, we decided to compromise with him. He had a 60 per cent attendance rate, and could have ended up with very poor GCSE results. So we arranged a construction placement for him. This meant that he sacrificed one GCSE, but he's had to work a lot harder at his remaining subjects to fulfil his side of the bargain. He has one more year to go, but now views school differently, and is doing well. He'll keep his construction placement and also get some GCSEs – a good outcome all round.

These measures are a real culture shift, a departure from the more traditional academic subjects and teaching methods, and we are really seeing the benefits.

By working closely with a core group of the most potentially disruptive students, we've managed to keep them on board, so they don't have such a negative influence on other pupils around them. Instead of punitive measures, we have praise, encouragement and a reward system. A week's full attendance earns a student points which convert into money to spend in the school shop, and we also have reward trips for pupils who have made great leaps during a term.

Parents have become more involved, too. They get regular reports and letters home, not just about bad news but about good news as well, which encourages pupils further.

Last year, 45 per cent of our GCSE passes were A*–C, which is a 20 per cent increase since we implemented the changes. This improvement also puts us in the top 5 per cent of schools in terms of Value Added Achievement. Another area of improvement has been in our management of pupils who use English as a second, or sometimes third or fourth, language. These pupils now have a tailor-made programme of induction into school, including special English lessons.

The whole school has a calmer atmosphere now. Today, I have no worries about showing visitors around, but before, you could never be sure what would be round the corner. Now, the pupils respond to visitors very well. I think we'll continue to improve in the years to come. It's a lot of hard work for all the staff, but the rewards are the results we're seeing.

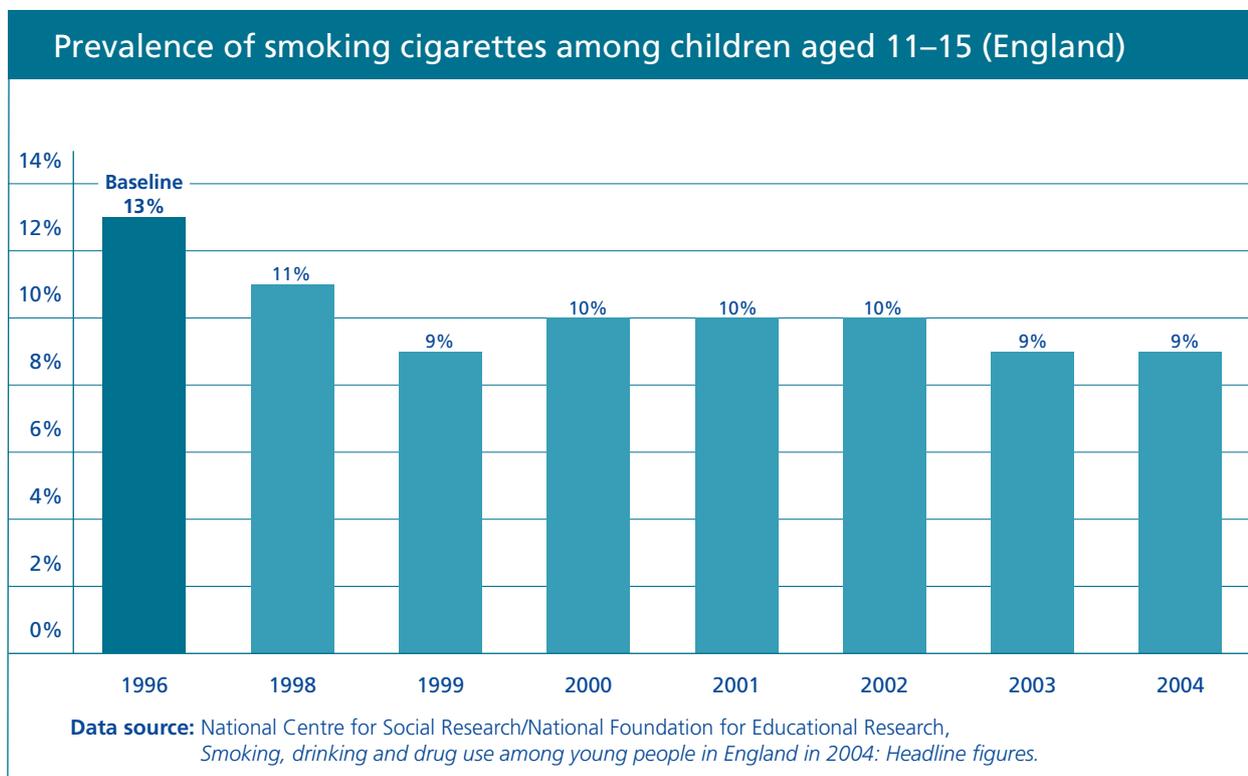
Delivering high-quality public services

There has been good progress in delivering accessible and high-quality health and social care, decent housing, promoting independent living and creating a safe environment. Our programme of investment in and reform of public services is vital for tackling poverty and deprivation in the round and for improving the quality of people's lives.

We will push forward with our reform of public services to offer ever greater choice and flexibility to meet the specific needs of individuals and break the cycle of dependency.

Progress so far

- We have ended the scandal of homeless families with children living for long periods in poor-quality bed and breakfast hotels.
- We have reduced the proportion of children living in homes that do not meet the set standard of decency from 41 per cent in 1996 to 27 per cent in 2003, and the proportion of pensioners living in homes that do not meet the set standard of decency from 46 per cent in 1996 to 32 per cent in 2003.
- The number of households in fuel poverty has fallen significantly between 1996 and 2003. Improvement in incomes has accounted for 61 per cent of the reduction, energy price changes for 22 per cent and improved energy efficiency for 17 per cent.
- The number of pensioners being helped to live independently through receiving intensive home care has risen: from 7.8 households per thousand in 1998/99 to 11.5 in 2004/05.
- We now have 42 per cent of schools achieving healthy school status. We are well on the way to reaching our aim of 50% of schools achieving this by December 2006.
- We have seen a reduction in smoking rates, both for women during pregnancy (from 23 per cent in 1995 to 19 per cent in 2000) and among children (from 13 per cent in 1996 to 9 per cent in 2004).



More to do

Our strategy is for the long term and we are determined to build on the progress we have started to achieve.

We aim to **support healthy living** by improving the lives and health of mothers and children from pregnancy onwards, and in doing so reduce infant mortality. Our strategy includes implementing the *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services*, improving access to neonatal services, reducing smoking during pregnancy and rolling out the Healthy Start scheme across the country.

We are determined to support children and parents to maintain healthy lifestyles. Levels of childhood obesity are rising, particularly among low-income families. As well as encouraging healthy eating, we want to increase the amount of physical activity that children undertake.

Together with local authorities, the local teenage pregnancy strategies aim to reduce the level of teenage pregnancies as well as providing support for young mothers and young fathers.

We are actively promoting healthy living among older people. Our White Paper on public health in England includes a range of measures to ensure that older people can enjoy leisure. The *National Service Framework for Older People* sets out our comprehensive strategy to ensure fair, high-quality integrated health and social care services for older people.

We are **helping people to stay independent** by ensuring that older people can live in their own home for as long as possible, in warmth and comfort. We are establishing, for the first time, an integrated home-visiting service that can offer older people a full care, benefit, heating and housing check-up, so they receive all the support they need.

We are putting older people in control of their own care arrangements, by providing individual budgets to those who want them, so that they can choose their own care packages. We are increasing our support for carers, including older carers. Produced in 1999, *Our National Strategy for Carers*, the first ever by a Government in Britain – has created a substantial policy package for carers.

We are **joining up services** through initiatives like the Link Age Plus pilots. They will build on the existing Link Age programme by testing out different delivery arrangements, offering client-focused services for older people in different local authority areas, as set out in the recent report *A Sure Start to Later Life*. The programmes aim to improve provision of, and access to, a range of local services for older people. The pilots cover not only financial and housing-related assistance and health and social care but also improvements to community services, such as transport, libraries, sport and leisure facilities.

We are **providing decent homes** by increasing the supply of new rented homes and, together with local authorities, improving the quality of social housing. Our *Sustainable Communities Strategy: Settled Homes, Changing Lives* is now focusing on reducing the numbers of families living in all forms of temporary accommodation.

We know that housing and social care and support are linked. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Department of Health continue to work together on initiatives reflecting this, such as the development of Extra Care housing. Provision of housing-related support through the our *Supporting People* programme is one of the main ways

that vulnerable people are given the opportunity of achieving or maintaining independence and a better quality of life.

Improving communities is crucial. People's lives are affected by their local environment; the mix of properties in the community and the public services available to the community. We will work towards cleaner, safer, greener public spaces, particularly in deprived areas. Our Respect agenda brings together central government, local agencies and local communities to work together to build communities where people can live safely side-by-side. Launched in 2006, the *Respect Action Plan* sets out how we can all help to play our part in putting a stop to anti-social behaviour and in building a modern culture of respect.

It is important that young people are given more choice and influence over the services and facilities available to them. The additional £53 million allocated to the Youth Opportunity Funds will ensure local authorities work with young people to establish the projects that they want in their area. We are also determined to tackle rural exclusion. In November 2004, we published our *Rural Strategy* which included a focus on older people.

Conclusion

Poverty and social exclusion are deep-rooted problems that take time and effort to combat. We have made significant and important progress in reducing poverty, particularly for pensioners and children. This is just the beginning, however, and we recognise that there is still much more to do if we are to realise our goals to tackle poverty; to break the cycle of deprivation throughout people's lives; and to build a society where no-one is held back by disadvantage or lack of opportunity.

Many of the causes of poverty are deeply embedded and we are therefore committed to a long-term strategy to address them. We will continue to build on our success so far and ensure that a co-ordinated approach is taken across all the key policies: helping people into work, providing financial support, breaking cycles of deprivation and delivering excellent public services.

We will work with individuals and families, and continue to make concerted efforts across central government and through partnership, working with the devolved administrations, local government and the voluntary and community sectors, ensuring that progress is maintained. By fighting poverty today, we prevent poverty tomorrow.

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