

# England case study:

## Drivers of policy change on child poverty and early childhood education and care

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### 1. Introduction

This case study is implemented within the project 'Fostering policy support for child and family wellbeing - Learning from international experience'. Using a thematic and analytic framework for the project that draws on Kingdon's multi-streams theory,<sup>2</sup> we are gathering and sharing evidence and learning on what has led to increased policy recognition of and policy change in family and child health and wellbeing (FCHW). In specific countries that have demonstrated policy recognition and change in FCHW post 2000, we are exploring within their context how different policy actors have come together to raise policy attention, develop policy options and promote their political adoption as processes for policy change, taking advantage of windows of opportunity for that change. The case studies were implemented with a local focal person with direct knowledge or experience of the policy process and include evidence from published and grey literature and interview of key informants involved in the policy processes.

**This case study explores drivers of change under a Labour government 1997-2010 and the subsequent Conservative governments post 2010 in policies for reducing child poverty and funding early childhood education and care (ECEC).**

While in opposition, *New Labour* emerged emphasising social justice, elimination of disadvantage and seeing welfare spending as an investment in future workers. The party had developed close relationships with academics and anti-poverty advocacy groups when in opposition, who continued to work with the party when it came to power on policies for raising households out of poverty, breaking the cycle of disadvantage, attracting mothers back to work, and introducing the minimum wage. The consequent need for childcare provision was shaped by *discovery* of the importance of early years for child development, and of ECEC for enabling all children to reach their full potential.

Some policies continued under the subsequent Conservative/Liberal coalition of 2010 and Conservative party led government from 2014. However, this experience showed that policy change needs support from a sufficiently powerful coalition of voters and interest groups to be sustained.

Some elements of the 1997-2010 agenda failed this test. *Sure Start* and *Children's Centres*, while popular with many users, were vulnerable to cut-backs. The position on childcare was slightly different, with an increase in free childcare entitlements for in-work parents. Moreover, while the system of state transfers and tax credits was cut back and the pledge to end child poverty abandoned, the national minimum wage policy was retained, with features of a pro-poor policy agenda that had wide political support and traction.

Seventy years of a welfare state embedded state services as a social wage, but 13 years of Thatcherite economics generated popular justifications against increased taxation to pay for it.

## 2. The context

England is the largest of the four countries in the United Kingdom (UK). Located in Western Europe, the UK is a high-income country with a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$35 500 in 2000, increasing to US\$42 990 at constant prices by 2018. The 2008 global crisis badly affected the UK, almost halting growth and resulting in *austerity* economic policies to reduce government debt. The UK population grew between 2000 and 2018 from 59 million to 67 million. It has an ageing population, raising considerable concern about the ability of a shrinking workforce to pay for the increasing social and healthcare costs of older people. About two thirds of women with children under 18 were in paid employment in 2000, increasing to around three quarters by 2018 (ONS, 2018).

The UK is a liberal democracy with a vibrant civil society. The post-war settlement and founding of the welfare state gave citizens social, economic, civil and political rights, recognising a collective responsibility to provide for the health and wellbeing of all members of society (Daly, 2010). The two main political parties, the centre-right Conservative party and social-democratic Labour party agreed on this settlement. However, the welfare state came under attack in the 1980s and 1990s under a new right Conservative government, poverty was deleted from the official policy vocabulary and there was a reduction in welfare spending, negatively impacting on families and child wellbeing (Abbott and Wallace, 1992).



Map of United Kingdom, Wikimedia Commons, undated

In 1997, a Labour government came to power committed to introducing social welfare policies to support citizens in times of need, ensuring paid work for those who could work and security for those who could not. The Conservative party had seen child wellbeing as a private family matter and poverty as the product of individual characteristics. The party attributed children's poverty due to parents' disinclination to work and preference for living on state benefits. The Labour government, however, argued that there was collective responsibility for child wellbeing. Poverty, in their view, was at least partly caused by factors outside the control of individual families. Similarly, while the Conservatives had regarded mothers' labour-market participation as an individual choice, the Labour Government argued that they should be encouraged to take paid employment, given the economic benefit this brings to families and the economy (HM Treasury, 2001).

When the Labour Party came to power in 1997, the UK had one of the highest rates of child poverty in Europe. One child in three was living in relative poverty and there were comparatively high socioeconomic inequalities and a relatively short period of paid maternity leave (SMC, 2018). Child poverty had increased sharply under the Conservative government, from around 15% when they came to power in 1979, to 33% when they left (Corlett et al., 2019). In 1974, 6.4% of children and young people under the age of 16 lived in families that relied on means-tested social assistance. By 1994 this had risen to 25% (Lewis et al., 2001). A quarter of all poor children lived in a household with at least one paid worker, and a third lived with a lone parent.

The state also played a limited role in early childhood education and care (ECEC) under the Conservative government. Childcare was provided by local authorities for children deemed *at risk* and by private and voluntary day nurseries and childminders for increasing numbers of children with working mothers. The Conservative government introduced nursery vouchers for all four-year-olds in 1996, but the amount did not cover most providers' charges and ECEC places were limited. In 1995, only 4% of children under-5-years were in nursery schools and nearly a quarter in nursery classes in infant schools, meaning that less than half of all children benefitted from a pre-school year (West and Noden, 2016).

### 3. The policy change

This section sets out advances in child poverty reduction policies and ECEC under the Labour government 1997-2010 and their reform and reversal under Conservative-led administrations after 2010. The forces and processes behind the policy changes are discussed in Section 4.

Both the Labour government in 1997 and the Conservative-led coalition in 2010 came to office stating a commitment to social justice, reducing child poverty and funding ECEC for all children. However, the policy levers they used to achieve these objectives differed. The Labour government used two main levers: reducing pressure on poor parents by increasing their incomes and increasing the capabilities of all parents and children, as set out in *Every Child Matters* 2003. The Conservative-led governments mainly used the second of these two approaches.

From 2000, the Labour government introduced policies for reducing child poverty by reforming the tax and benefit system. In 1999, the minimum wage came into force and in 1999 and 2001, reforms to the tax and benefits systems increased the incomes of all low-income families (Lewis and West, 2017). Paid maternity leave was increased from 18-weeks to 6-months in 2002 and to 9-months in 2004. Parental leave was introduced in 1999. In 2002, parents with children under the age of six years were given the statutory right to request flexible or part-time working.

In 2004, local authorities were required to ensure adequate ECEC for the needs of working parents. In 2008, the fiscal stimuli that followed the global economic crisis included increased tax and social security benefits for families. In 2010, the *Child Poverty Act*, passed with cross-party support, committed to ending child poverty by 2020, with a *Child Poverty Commission* established to measure progress.

Measures to increase the capabilities of children and parents were also put in place providing free ECEC for all children, improving its quality, and providing additional support for children and their families living in deprived neighbourhoods. In 1999, all 4-year-olds were given an entitlement to a state-funded preschool place; this was extended to 3-year-olds in 2004 and, in 2010, the number of funded hours was increased. Interventions to improve the quality of ECEC included raising the qualifications of the workforce, regulating staff/child ratios, bringing in a national early years curriculum and introducing quality assurance schemes (Lewis and West, 2017).

In 1999, Sure Start was launched, with plans to roll out centres to provide integrated services to families with children under-4-years in deprived neighbourhoods (Eisenstadt, 2011). In 2004, the centres were renamed 'children's centres' and plans were put in place for one in every neighbourhood, supported by ringfenced funding for local authorities. In 2008, following a review of *Every Child Matters*, a parenting intervention programme was set up.

The Labour government also put strategies in place to ensure integrated policy development and service delivery. At a national level, it set up interdepartmental working and ministerial groups, established the *Children's and Young People's Unit* in 2000, created a new post of Children's Minister in 2003 and, in 2007, renamed the Department of Education, the Department for Children, Schools and Families. To ensure joined-up service delivery at a local level, the 2004 Children's Act required local authorities to appoint a director of children's services.

In 2010, a Conservative-led government came to power committed to austerity following the global economic crisis of 2008. While by the time it came to power it had rejected the moral individualism of Thatcherism and accepted a collective responsibility for raising the next generation, it still favoured individualistic explanations for poverty over the societal explanations that influenced Labour policy. While the Labour Party was concerned with living standards and equality, the Conservative Party was more concerned about individual responsibility (McEnhill and Taylor-Gooby, 2018).

On coming to power, the Conservatives immediately began to dismantle some of Labour's policies. For example, all reference to the *Every Child Matters* agenda was removed within 24 hours of the coalition coming to power. The Department for Children, Schools and Families was renamed the Department for Education, signalling a return to a narrower focus for children's policy. In the 2010 budget, there was a cut of £11 billion in welfare benefits, disproportionately affecting families.

In 2012, the *Welfare Reform Act* legislated for Universal Credit, designed to simplify and streamline the benefits system and to reduce benefits for workless families, with a range of sanctions for non-compliance (Millar and Bennett, 2017). The 2015 budget introduced a two-child limit for *child tax* and *universal credits* and lowered the *benefit cap*. In 2016, the *Welfare Reform and Work Act* removed the statutory target of eliminating child poverty by 2020. However, in 2016, the government introduced the *living wage* at a higher level than the minimum wage. Furthermore in 2017, the free childcare allowance was increased to 30 hours per week for dual-earner/employed lone-parent households. These shifts emphasised family responsibility for reducing poverty rather than the needs of children, especially from deprived families, for ECEC.

The *Sure Start* grant to local authorities was replaced by an *Early Intervention* grant in 2010, which brought together a range of preventative services including early years and children's centres. However, it was not made a statutory requirement and, in 2015, the ring-fence on the grant was removed. The *Can Parent Initiative* was designed to increase the market for parenting programmes by offering vouchers to all parents. In 2017, the *Improving lives: Helping Workless Families Analysis and Resource Pack* emphasised unemployment and parental behaviour as the main drivers of poor child outcomes, emphasising a return to views of individual responsibility for FCHW and individualistic explanations for poverty. The table overleaf summarises the timeline of the reforms.

Between 1997 and 2010, there was an increase in ECEC and maternal employment, a reduction in child poverty and a more child-centred approach for targeted support for young children and their families living in the most deprived neighbourhoods (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019). By 2009, Labour was investing 1% more of GDP a year in children than when it came to power. Spending on state benefits increased by 61% between 2000 and 2010 (Kelly et al., 2018). By 2010, the UK had achieved the biggest reduction in child poverty of any OECD country, with 1.1 million children lifted out of poverty (Thane and Davidson, 2016; Waldfogel, 2010). Spending on early years education increased by 58% per pupil between 1999 and 2009/10 and there was an expansion in *Sure Start*, with more *Children's Centres* opened than originally planned (Cattan et al., 2019). Evaluations of *Sure Start* have generally been positive, showing benefits for children and their mothers; and good value for money (Cattan et al., 2019; Gaheer and Paull, 2016; Melhuish, 2015).



Sure Start Building, Wikimedia Commons, undated

Since 2010, there has been a reduction in financial support for families and in services, due both to changes in policy and spending cut-backs under austerity policies. The Conservatives, like the Labour government, wanted to make work pay, but they aimed to do so by introducing policies so that benefits incomes were lower than the lowest-paid employment. *Universal Credit*, their flagship policy for doing so, has not only increased the depth of poverty for those reliant on benefits but also increased poverty among working families. By 2018, being in employment no longer guaranteed an escape from poverty. In 1996/97, 44% of poor children lived in a family where at least one adult was in employment; by 2017/18, this had increased to 70%, with 33% of children living in poverty; little different from the 2000 figure (SMC, 2018). There is some evidence that increased entitlement to free childcare has increased mothers' ability to work. The record on funding service provision to raise parent's and children's capabilities is more mixed.

There has been increased spending on free ECEC places for children 3-5-years (with a 17% increase per pupil in funding, cf. 58% increase under Labour) and increased funding for parenting education which is relatively inexpensive. However, the number of *Sure Start Children’s Centres* has decreased with spending falling by almost half between 2010 and 2017 (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019).

### Timeline of policy and reforms on promoting children’s wellbeing

Year	Policy/ law/ program
1999	Parental leave introduced - up to 3 months of job-protected unpaid leave National minimum wage came into force Working families’ tax credit introduced and <i>Universal Child Benefit</i> increased. <i>Sure Start Centres</i> planned for deprived neighbourhoods All 4-year-olds offered a free part-time preschool place for 12 hours a week
2000	<i>Children and Young People’s Unit</i> established at the Department for Education
2001	<a href="#"><i>Tackling child poverty: giving every child the best possible start in life</i></a>
2002	<a href="#"><i>Employment Act 2002</i></a> increased statutory paid maternity leave to 6 months
2003	First Minister for Children appointed. <a href="#"><i>Every Child Matters</i></a> launched
2004	<a href="#"><i>Children Act</i></a> : local authorities to have a Director of Children’s Services Statutory paid maternity leave extended to 9 months <i>Sure Start Children’s Centres</i> for children 0-3 made a universal service All 3-year olds eligible for free part-time ECEC place Revised curriculum for 0-2-year-olds and 3-5-year-olds introduced <a href="#"><i>Choice for parents, the best start for children: A ten-year childcare strategy</i></a>
2007	Department for Children, Schools and Families created Parenting programme introduced
2010	<a href="#"><i>Child Poverty Act</i></a> and <i>Child Poverty Commission</i> established State-funded preschool hours increased to 15 hours a week Conservative budget £11 billion of welfare cuts, particularly affecting families
2011	<a href="#"><i>A new approach to child poverty: tackling the causes of disadvantage and transforming families’ lives</i></a> argued poverty due to poor parenting
2012	<a href="#"><i>Welfare Reform Act</i></a> <i>Child Poverty Commission</i> renamed <i>Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission</i>
2015	Budget introduced cuts in benefits for poor families
2016	<a href="#"><i>Welfare Reform and Work Act</i></a> repealed the 2010 <i>Child Poverty Act</i> <i>Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission</i> renamed <i>Social Mobility Commission</i> . <i>Living wage</i> introduced Increase in free preschool entitlement to 30 hours per week for working families
2017	£12 billion cuts in tax credits and benefits

Sources: Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019; Kelly et al., 2018; Piachaud and Sutherland, 2001

## 4. The story of the change

### 4.1 Raising the issue

This section explores the actors, processes and evidence that raised motivations to address child poverty and ECEC that became linked to policy options when the window of opportunity opened with the election of the Labour government in 1997.

The Labour Party came to power in 1997 following a landslide general election victory. It was a time of optimism after the cold war, with peace and stability, economic boom and rising living standards in Europe. There had been an increase in child poverty and a failure to introduce ECEC in the 1980s and 1990s, due mainly to the New Right ideology of the Conservative government led by Margret Thatcher. This positioned raising children as a private family matter, poor people as being responsible for their own plight and the state as providing only a minimum safety net (Abbott and Wallace, 1992; Thane and Davidson, 2016). Public services in the UK had been neglected and had fallen far behind standards in the rest of Western Europe. The British public wanted improvements and saw health and education as pressing priorities (Toynbee and Walker, 2010).

The public resented [increased inequalities](#) after 17 years of Conservative rule and thought that the income gap was too large. Attitudes to poverty and welfare spending were complex, but only a minority thought that welfare spending should be reduced (Orton and Rowlingson, 2007). Even after the Labour Party came to power, public opinion was more concerned about economic inequalities and inequality of opportunity than poverty *per se*. The Thatcher years left a legacy of public opinion, especially among Conservative voters, tending to blame child poverty on parents and especially lone parents, rather than seeing it as a social problem that required a collective response (Park et al., 2013). As we discuss below, this was partly why Conservative-led governments were able to reverse Labour policies for reducing child poverty after 2010.

The main FCHW issues raised in the 1990s were high child poverty rates; promotion of FCHW in the context of diversified family forms and sustaining economic competitiveness with an ageing population. There was a perceived need to activate workers, especially women, and to ensure that all children reached their full potential. Five interrelated issues were raised by a number of actors that included think tanks, civil society, trade unions, women's groups and the Labour Party itself. These were: the relatively high proportion of children living in poverty; women's employment and equal opportunities; the lack of affordable ECEC; the relatively small proportion of children who benefited from a preschool education; and the importance of active parenting.

The issue of child poverty was not new. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), for example, was founded in 1965 amidst growing concern about it among social workers and academics (Thane and Davidson, 2016). Academics such as Peter Townsend (a co-founder) and Brian Abel-Smith argued that poor children were severely disadvantaged in educational and work opportunities because of poor health. Townsend's work on poverty and deprivation influenced the Labour Party Policy from the 1950s, when he worked for policy think tanks, published articles for the Fabian Society and worked with [Richard Titmuss](#), a long-time advisor to the Labour Party, an influential advisor on the foundation of the welfare state and the first Professor of Social Administration at the London School of Economics and Political Science (Thompson, n.d.).

Townsend is credited with having *rediscovered* poverty in the 1960s, and his ground-breaking research included challenging the argument that the welfare state had eliminated it, arguing instead that in affluent societies, *relative* poverty was the major issue. He argued that children and adults living in households were poorer than the mainstream when they did not have the resources to participate in taken-for-granted everyday activities (Townsend, 1979). He and his colleagues' arguments were brought to the attention of the general public and politicians by CPAG (Glennerster et al., 2004).

However, the ideological climate of the Conservative government made it difficult for such messages to be heard; Margaret Thatcher had won widespread support for her austerity policies and for blaming poverty on poor people (Thane and Davidson, 2016).

By the 1990s, the window of opportunity opened with the election of a Labour government. At this time, child poverty had become even more of a concern among advocacy groups. The rate had doubled between 1979 and 1990 from about 15% to 30% and the levels of poverty in workless households with children were especially high (Thane and Davidson, 2016). The level of child poverty in the UK was the highest in Europe and [one of the highest in the OECD](#), and provision of ECEC was one of the poorest. In its periodic report based on data from the 1990s, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child raised concerns about children in poverty, the adequacy of benefits and the availability and effectiveness of parenting education (CRC, 2002).

Campaign groups and policy advisers to the Labour Party and Labour government, such as CPAG, the Institute for Public Policy Research, Gillian Pugh, Naomi Eisenstadt and Carey Oppenheim, as well as the [Commission for Social Justice](#), set up by the Labour Party in 1992, used research to show that child poverty had implications for children's wellbeing and well-becoming and that ECEC can mitigate this impact.

They argued that while all stages of childhood matter, early childhood is especially important. They pointed to research evidence that child outcomes are the result of complex interactions of socioeconomic circumstances, parental financial and educational resources and a range of intermediate factors. This work set out that early experiences have an impact on lifelong wellbeing, with inequalities in social, cognitive and physical development emerging early in a child's life and widening as children grow older and with child wellbeing outcomes, language acquisition and social and emotional development rising with their parent's socioeconomic status.

Poor parenting, however, was not a sufficient explanation for poorer development of children from poor homes. While the family has primary influence, structural factors were also demonstrated to be important. So too were community influences, including physical and social environments and access to services, support and wider society. Family income was demonstrated as having an independent influence on outcomes. Economic hardship was associated with greater stress on parents and poorer maternal mental health, with impacts on parenting and the resources available to parents to ensure that children are nourished and have stimulating environments (Eisenstadt, 2011; Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019). These research findings influenced Labour policy on FCHW and especially influenced the Sure Start programme (see [Sections 4.2 and 4.3](#)).

Advocacy for ECEC was also not new. In 1980, Bruner published a seminal study on ECEC provision for under-5s. He showed it to reflect a mix of unfulfilled government promises and the voluntary sector's attempts to fill gaps, concluding that the UK had the poorest state provision for under-5's in Europe (Bruner, 1980).

Sixteen years later, Pugh, an advocate for early years provision who had set up the Early Childhood Unit at the National Children's Bureau, acknowledged some progress, but was critical of the lack of an integrated early years policy (Pugh, 1996). She pointed out that children from poor backgrounds did less well at school than their better-off peers and were more likely to be unemployed as adults, to experience more health problems and to become parents in their teens. Research also demonstrated that appropriate services for parents and preschool-aged children, including ECEC, can help to narrow the outcome gap and that investing in children makes economic sense, as they grow up to be more productive adults (Young, 1996; Eisenstadt, 2011).

Women's groups and trade unionists raised the issues of gender equality and mothers' employment. In 1986, women activists formed the Childcare Trust, now [Coram and Childcare](#), campaigning for high-quality, affordable and flexible childcare for all. The Trust carried out research on issues that working families faced and their *Childcare Survey* is the most widely used source of information on childcare in the UK (see [Section 4.2](#)).

At this time, the idea that women could have paid employment on the same basis as men was socially accepted and indeed expected by the 1980s with mothers in poor households increasingly expected to take paid employment to help raise families out of poverty. However, available work tended to be poorly paid and precarious. When mothers did have paid employment, they were still expected to be responsible for childcare and the home. This meant that they needed flexible, affordable and accessible childcare, which was often difficult to find.

While still in opposition, the Labour Party raised concerns about FCHW. In his 1994 party conference speech, Tony Blair, the party leader, raised issues of child poverty and lack of support for families, as well as the importance of fairness and social justice (Blair, 1994). In their [manifesto](#), education was the number one priority, along with building strong families and communities. They promised to: enable all 4-year-olds to have one-year of free preschool and set a target for extending it to 3-year-olds; give lone parents help in taking up employment; have a national childcare strategy to support employed mothers; and reform the tax and benefits system to support families. It was in his 1999 Beveridge Lecture, however, that Blair most clearly articulated Labour's policy shift to promoting child wellbeing, making an unexpected pledge to end child poverty by 2020. Gordon Brown (the Chancellor of the Exchequer) subsequently indicated that children were the government's first priority (Lansley, 2011) (see later). Children were thus firmly *placed on the political agenda* as citizens in their own right and the government acknowledged collective responsibility for their wellbeing. This commitment to a child poverty agenda, coming in a period when the Labour Party dominated politically, with large parliamentary majorities and generally benign economic and fiscal conditions, set the platform for a considerable policy debate and shift across welfare, labour-market and wider social policy.

Once the Labour Party came to power, the issue became one of holding the Party accountable for its commitments. The Party was committed to evidence-informed policy and the Number 10 Policy Unit recruited advisors from policy think tanks and Universities, discussed later. The [End Child Poverty Campaign](#) was set up in 2003, with over 150 member organisations, to inform the public about the causes and effects of poverty and build commitment between and across the public, voluntary and private sectors to promote the case for ending child poverty by 2020. It also campaigned against means-tested benefits because of their low uptake, and for children's allowances to be paid to the main carer because this makes it more likely to be spent on children. It remained difficult, however, to get the public and the media to support the campaign for ending child poverty, although public opinion polls showed that the public did broadly support *welfare to work* policies and welfare for those unable to work (Thane and Davidson, 2016; Waldfogel, 2010).

The New Right view that child poverty was the fault of 'irresponsible *welfare-state scroungers*' (sic) parents remained influential, however. Although there was strong support for health and education services, there was little support for increasing taxes to pay for them. Conservative voters in particular believed that while there are some deserving benefit claimants, most claimants made a rational choice to stay on benefits because the welfare system created disincentives to work. They also thought that benefit claimants cannot be trusted to spend their benefits wisely and that a significant proportion made fraudulent claims. Conservative voters generally only supported welfare spending to promote equal opportunity, rather than to make society more equal (Shorthouse and Kirkby, 2014). The Labour Party supported the repeal of the *Child Poverty Act* in 2016 on the basis that the electorate did not want increased welfare spending.

Before coming to office, the Conservative Party succeeded in shifting the policy focus. They used the economic crisis to argue that the Labour Party's profligate spending on welfare was partly to blame (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019). They convinced the electorate that the main priority was to reduce the deficit by reducing state spending and that raising taxes to fund welfare spending was not viable. Rejecting the argument that raising the incomes of poor families through tax credits and benefits will reduce child poverty, they held to the view that it is necessary to tackle child poverty through parental behaviour and to invest in interventions to build parents' and children's capabilities. They argued that the main cause of poverty was unemployed parents apathetic about seeking work or harmful drug and alcohol users and that parental employment was the best cure for poverty. They thus reframed the main issue as one not of child poverty but of poor parenting.



Campaign groups and academics continued to advocate for reducing child poverty after 2010. Research showed that the poorer half of the income distribution lost out from austerity measures while the richer half became better off (Thane and Davidson, 2016). The *End Poverty Campaign* continues to be active and the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) and [CPAG](#) regularly commission research and publish reports and policy briefs on child poverty. The [UN Special Rapporteur](#) on extreme poverty has also been critical of the levels of child poverty and deprivation in the UK (Alston, 2019) and, given the lack of official measures, the [Social Metrics Commission](#) was brought together by the Legatum Institute to develop a new poverty measure. The media have also continued to report on [child poverty research](#) published by campaign groups. The Labour Party have said that if they are elected they will put [tackling poverty back at the heart of the policy agenda](#).

The political and media discourse around poverty has influenced public perceptions independently of changes in poverty levels (Curtice et al., 2019). There has been an increase between 2006 and 2018 in the proportion of people who think that poverty is quite high from 52% to 65%; that poverty had increased over the previous decade (from 32% to 62%); and that poverty will increase over the next decade (from 44% to 61%). There has also been a reduction in support for large income differences as an acceptable reward for talent and effort (from 64% to 53% from 2008 to 2016).

While public attitudes towards benefit claimants hardened following the 2008 economic crisis, they may have softened somewhat since 2015, including for families on low incomes and lone-parents. There has also been a decrease in the proportion who agree that *if welfare benefits weren't so generous people would learn to stand on their own two feet* from 55% to 43% from 2010 to 2017 (Phillips et al., 2018: 17).

## 4.2 Developing policy options and changing justifications

**This subsection outlines the various actors and processes that informed policy options both under the Labour government 1997-2010 and Conservative-led governments from 2010 up to date.**

Under the Labour government (1997-2010) there was a shift in policy framing, from childcare and child welfare to child wellbeing, giving every child the best possible start in life and the opportunity to realise his or her potential, both as a matter of social justice and as a future economic investment. The agendas targeted four key areas: (1) reducing child poverty by promoting work for mothers and making it pay; (2) providing equitable access to the labour market specifically for mothers, most notably by increasing parental leave; (3) lifting households with children out of poverty; and (4) enabling all children to reach their full potential with additional support for children from deprived homes, most notably by increasing the provision of state-funded ECEC and parenting education as a human right and as an investment in the quality of the future labour force.

The Labour party began developing policy options when in opposition. In 1992, it set up the [Commission on Social Justice](#) to advise on an economic and social reform agenda to make the UK a fairer society. The Commission was hosted by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), a left-leaning policy think tank. Patricia Hewitt, the deputy director of IPPR, had been press secretary to Neil Kinnock, a former Labour Party leader. The Secretary to the Commission was David Miliband, an IPPR researcher. Commissioners included academics considered experts in their fields, including Eithne McLaughlin (sociology), Tony Atkinson (poverty), Ruth Lister (social policy) and Penelope Leach (child development). It also included representatives from minority groups, business, religion and civil society. Policy papers were also commissioned from leading academic experts on social and public policy.

The Commission recommended *investment state* policies. Rejecting Thatcher era deregulation, it argued that the benefits system should help people deal with unpredictable changes but give them a hand up, not a hand-out, and should guarantee a minimum income with means-tested benefits designed to *make work pay*. It also recommended a radical expansion of education (including ECEC) and training for the long-term unemployed and lone parents, a *National Minimum Wage* and a social revolution in women's life chances at home and in paid employment (CSJ, 1994).

The recommendations of the Commission resulted in a rebranding of Labour, with Tony Blair first referring to *New Labour* at the party's 1994 conference. *New Labour* was heavily influenced by the investment state set out by Tony Giddens in *Third Way* (Giddens, 1998). An approach also being adopted by Bill Clinton in the US and by the EU (Teti et al., 2020). Welfare spending was justified on the grounds that it was an investment which would bring a high return.

*New Labour* was also committed to active labour-market policies, making work pay, supporting those on benefits to return to employment and especially encouraging married women with children to take up paid employment. David Miliband and Patricia Hewett continued to influence Labour policy in the run up to the 2007 election, with David Miliband recruited from IPPR by Tony Blair to head his policy unit and help write the 1997 Labour Party Manifesto. When the Labour Party was elected, David Miliband became head of the Number 10 Policy Unit and other researchers from IPPR were recruited as policy advisors. Patricia Hewitt was elected as a Labour MP in the 1997 general election.

In his 1994 Labour Conference speech, Tony Blair raised the issue of child poverty and lack of support for families, as well as stressing the importance of fairness and social justice (Blair, 1994). In their [election manifesto](#), the Labour Party identified education as their number one priority, with building strong families and communities as priorities.

The Manifesto promised quality education for all 4-year-olds in nursery classes, universal provision for all 3-year olds, and piloting early excellence centres combining education and care (Labour Party, 1997). It also committed to: reducing unemployment; helping people into employment; and helping lone parents to get employment once their youngest child had settled in school. It intended to do this by developing a package of job search, training and after-school care to help people move off benefits. It recognised the importance of the state supporting families in looking after their children, with a proposed national childcare strategy making provision to enable families to balance family and working life, and a commitment to retain universal child benefit. Because policies were well-developed prior to election, the shift began as soon as the Labour party were elected to power.

However, it was in his 1999 Beveridge Lecture that Blair most clearly articulated Labour's shift to promoting child wellbeing making an unexpected pledge to end child poverty by 2020. Gordon Brown (Chancellor of the Exchequer) subsequently indicated that children were the government's first priority, discussed below (Lansley, 2011). Children were thus firmly placed on the political agenda as citizens in their own right and with the government acknowledging collective responsibility for their wellbeing.

Commitment to a child poverty agenda, coming in a period when the Labour Party dominated politically, with large parliamentary majorities and generally benign economic and fiscal conditions, set the platform for a considerable policy debate and shift across welfare, labour-market and wider social policy. In the 1999 pre-budget statement, Gordon Brown turned Tony Blair's pledge to end child poverty by 2020 into a policy objective as part of making Britain a fairer society (Brown, 1999). The 1999 budget began the tax and benefit system reform designed to end child poverty.

On taking power, Labour also cancelled the opt-out from the *European Social Charter* invoked by the previous Conservative administration, making European social standards binding for Britain. This required, among other provisions developing policies for maternity, paternity and parental leave. Reforms were introduced in 2002 and 2004.

In developing ECEC options, the Labour government were able to look back to the 1967 [Plowden Report](#) recommendation to expand pre-school education and the Conservative government's 1972 proposal for free preschool education. The latter was never implemented due to the economic down-turn in the 1970s and the austerity and market-driven policies of Conservative governments in the 1980s. The Labour government was also influenced by research into ECEC provision findings that quality and parental involvement were important and international research showing that well-designed interventions could mitigate the negative impact of growing up in deprivation and improve children's life chances (Melhuish, 1993, 2004; Anning and Edwards, 2006; Sylva et al., 2004).

When Labour took up office, Norman Glass, a Treasury civil servant fascinated by the argument that investment in poor young children could mean significant cost savings to the taxpayer convinced Gordon Brown to let him research policy options (Eisenstadt, 2011). A steering group was set up of civil servants and a Ministerial Group to review policy and develop recommendations. External experts and the voluntary sector were consulted, and officials travelled to the US and across England to see programmes and home-grown projects.

The review concluded that: the early years were the most important for child development and environmental factors had an influence; multiple disadvantage for young children was a risk factor for social exclusion later in life; services for children under-4 years of age were patchy and of variable quality; and the provision of comprehensive services for deprived children and parents would have a positive impact and help break the cycle of disadvantage (Glass, 1999). The recommendations provided the basis for the *Sure Start* policy, and a unit to develop *Sure Start* was set up in the Department of Education, with Naomi Eisenstadt, an experienced early years practitioner, appointed to head it; she ran the Unit for its first seven years.

The Labour government also appointed external experts to advise on policy options and consulted external bodies. George Bain, a former Professor of Industrial Relations, for example, was brought in as the first Chair of the Low Pay Commission (1997-2002) and to advise on flexible working (the Work and Parents Taskforce 2001). He managed to make recommendations for flexible working that were acceptable to the Confederation of British Industry, the Trade Union Congress and the Equal Opportunities Commission, which was a significant achievement.

The Equal Opportunities Commission was also influential in framing childcare options, and the Day-Care Trust, an independent group that campaigned for high-quality, flexible and affordable childcare, funded work on [modelling the costs of early education/childcare options that was influential](#). CPAG played an important role in the government's decision to pay Children's Tax Credits to the main carer and for the continuation and uprating of the universal Children's Allowance (Thane and Davidson, 2016).

The government consulted on policy options such as its [childcare strategy](#) in 2004. It used a number of ways to consult, including structured parent forums, publication of a widely distributed summary leaflet inviting written responses, direct consultation with key stakeholders, and a seminar for representative groups and experts to debate the strategy.

By the time they came to office in 2010, in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives had adopted a modernising agenda and stated a commitment to social justice. While they took a different view of family policy from Labour, they agreed there was a legitimate role for government and society in raising the next generation. They [accepted Labour's targets for reducing child poverty](#), but argued that Labour's policy would not achieve them because it did not tackle the causes of the cycle of disadvantage, which they identified as poor parenting skills. They shifted policy priorities from reducing child poverty to [promoting social mobility](#) by building parents' and children's capabilities to break the cycle of disadvantage. They did, however, retain the emphasis on *making work pay* and using taxes and benefits to incentivise employment.

The shift in Conservative thinking was influenced by a report they had commissioned while in opposition from the Centre for Social Justice, a think tank established by Ian Duncan Smith, a Conservative MP and former leader of the party. The report, [Breakdown Britain](#), focused on five pathways to poverty: family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependency, indebtedness and addiction, seeing linear cause-and-effect relationships rather than complex relations between poverty and the issues identified (SJPG, 2006). Parents' behaviour was seen as the main cause of poor outcomes for children and as setting up intergenerational disadvantage. Policy options were also heavily influenced by behavioural science but did not take account of the fact that poverty itself has a relationship with poor outcomes for children and that being poor makes it more difficult to be a good parent, a major driver of Labour policy (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019).

Like the Labour government, the Conservatives commissioned experts to advise on policy options. They appointed Frank Field, a Labour MP and a former Director of CPAG in June 2010 to advise on breaking the cycle of disadvantage, focusing on behavioural change of poor parents and building the capabilities of parents and children. In his report [The foundation years: Preventing poor children becoming poor adults](#), he argued that poor parents lack the capabilities to provide stimulation for their children that would enable them to do well in the education system. He recommended cutting income support for poor parents and investing instead in intensive parent support and ECEC. He also recommended that measures of child poverty should be replaced with a measure of parental disadvantage: entrenched worklessness, family breakdown, debt and drug and alcohol problems.

Another independent report was commissioned from Labour MP Graham Allen in 2010 on what works in terms of early interventions for children at risk. In his report [Early intervention: the next steps](#) he argued that early intervention and prevention were efficient and effective. He focused on building social and emotional capabilities in babies, children and young people and argued that the government should invest in proven programmes that had been shown to make a difference. Following publication of his report, he founded the Early Intervention Foundation, a *what works centre*, to establish the efficacy of various early interventions in children's lives. It received initial government funding of £3.5 million.

In implementing policies, the Coalition government built on Labour's emphasis on parenting and ECEC but reduced spending on the *Sure Start* programme. In its first budget in 2010, it introduced cuts in welfare benefits that badly hit poor families and continued to cut benefits in subsequent budgets. In 2012, it legislated for *Universal Credit*, intended to simplify the benefit system but also to make work pay by reducing benefits for workless families. It also introduced parenting programmes (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019). Following the 2015 general election, the Conservatives removed the ring-fence from the *Early Intervention Grant*, which funded *Sure Start Centres*, meaning that local government could use the funding elsewhere.

The 2016 *Welfare Reform and Work Act* removed statutory obligations on local authorities to reduce child poverty and repealed the commitment to end child poverty by 2020. The benefit cap was lowered, and child benefit payments limited to two children. Child poverty was dropped as an indicator of child wellbeing and growing up in a workless family introduced as an indicator of a child's life chances.



Preschool children enjoy reading time, Wikimedia Commons, undated

In 2016, a set of nine indicators of parental disadvantages and children and young people's educational outcomes were introduced to replace child poverty: entrenched worklessness, family breakdown, problem debt, drug and alcohol dependency. These indicators had been recommended in *Breakdown Britain* and the *Foundation Years* reports. The 2018 budget signalled a continuation of the squeeze on families with low incomes (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019).

Policies adopted by the two parties were the outcome of competing policy paradigms, with the Conservatives emphasising individual responsibility as opposed the Labour emphasis on structural inequalities, and Labour using the two-pronged approach of easing pressure on parents and building the capabilities of parents and children and the Conservatives focusing on the latter. Of the four policy areas we identified, the policies adopted for activating mothers and giving them equitable access to the labour market were much the same and financial help for part-time ECEC and maternity, paternity and parental leave with little attention to whether this constituted equitable access.

The third issue, lifting households out of poverty, is where the Conservatives and Labour differed most. They agreed that parental employment was the best way of families moving out of poverty, with policies for *making work pay* and a minimum wage. However, while Labour used the tax and benefit system to reduce poverty among families in and out of work, the Conservatives incentivised work by reducing benefits for those put of work, incentivising work, while reducing the tax and benefits of low-paid working families to incentivise them to work harder. While the Labour Party adopted policies to take the pressure off poor parents, giving them more time and energy to care for children, the Conservatives aimed for behavioural correlates of poor parenting: worklessness, family breakdown, debt and drug and alcohol abuse. In doing so, the Conservative's policy options were in line with their neoliberal economic policies while Labour adopted social investment state policies aimed at ameliorating the inequalities generated by neo-liberal economic policies.

The fourth issue, of ensuring that all children reach their full potential, is also one where the parties differed. The Labour government focused on increasing the income of poor parents through the tax and benefit system to reduce the pressures on them, enabling them to be better parents; providing high-quality ECEC for all children with targeted additional support for disadvantaged children, especially in the early years and providing parenting education. Conservative-led governments voiced support for education of parents and children, but focused on poor parenting in practice.

### 4.3 Engaging and building support of political actors and decision makers

**This subsection explores how the attention of political actors was drawn to the issue of child poverty and ECEC and their support secured.**

Children are now firmly on the political agenda in England and it is inconceivable for a political party not to declare policy objectives for children. There is broad consensus across the political parties that the state and society have a legitimate role to play in raising the next generation. The media now devotes more attention to children and children's issues and sees it as an important part of their role to question political party representatives about child policies.

The Labour Party came power in 1997 committed to prioritising education and support for families. Once in government, they appointed experts on children and wellbeing to the No 10 Policy Unit; for example, Carey Oppenheim, who had been head of research at CPAG, became the government's advisor on childcare. A number of senior members of the Labour government were long-time supporters of policies to improve child wellbeing. Gordon Brown is generally credited with being the real driver behind Labour's child poverty strategy, having already taken up the cause of child poverty as a back-bench MP. As Chancellor, he argued that *tackling child poverty is the best anti-drug, anti-crime, anti-deprivation policy for our country* (Brown, 2000: quoted in Lister 2006, 317). Many of the policy measures taken towards achieving the child poverty goal were devised in and driven from the Treasury including tax credits, the expansion of childcare and Sure Start.

Other senior members of the Labour government were strong supporters of Labour's children's policy. Tessa Jowell and David Blunkett worked together on ideas for a programme for young children from deprived homes. Margaret Hodge was responsible for the commitment to free nursery education in the Labour Party Manifesto of 1997, having been influenced by an advocacy group of early years experts led by Gillian Pugh, head of early years at the National Children's Bureau (Eisenstadt, 2011). Estelle Morris had been a teacher and Harriet Harman a social worker. Harriet Harman stepped down as a Minister to do research on childcare to inform policy. Momentum continued because children's issues had continuing representation at the Cabinet table.

[Frank Field](#) was also a Labour MP, a former director of CPAG and a long-term anti-poverty campaigner. However, he disagreed with Labour's emphasis on increasing the income of poor families and argued for breaking the cycle of disadvantage by improving parenting and schooling, thereby improving the life chances of poor children and enabling them to secure better paid, higher skilled jobs. He criticised the Government for shifting from *Sure Start Centres* aimed at breaking the cycle of disadvantage for poor children to a universal service for all children. He has also been very critical of the Conservative *Universal Credit* policy. Graham Allen was another Labour MP who thought that it was important to have early years intervention to boost the life chances of 0-to-3-year-olds. He co-authored *Early intervention: good parents, great kids, better citizens* with Conservative MP Ian Duncan-Smith (Graham and Smith, 2007).

As discussed above, the Conservative government came to office committed to a role for the state in promoting FCHW. It is more difficult to identify political figures who championed policies for promoting child wellbeing in office, but Ian Duncan Smith has advocated policies to make work pay by cutting benefits to workless families, arguing that the best way for children to be lifted out of poverty is for their parents to be in paid employment and to be good parents.

David Cameron and Theresa May both expressed support for a strong role for government and society and championed policies to support social mobility. However, in-work poverty has increased since 2010, *Sure Start* and family centres have been decimated by local authority budget cuts and ECEC is increasingly seen as providing childcare for working parents as discussed above.

More broadly, Conservative governments, first under Cameron and then under May, have replaced a definition of child poverty with one of child disadvantage as well as cutting benefits and tax credits for workless and low-income families. This is in line with Conservative philosophy, retains the loyalty of MPs more to the right of the party and appeals to Conservative voters, who generally see poverty and inequality as less problematic than supporters of other parties and are more likely to see generous welfare benefits as encouraging welfare dependency (Curtice et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2018). Boris Johnston replaced Theresa May as Conservative Party leader in July 2019.

Since 2016, when the British electorate voted to leave the Common Market, British politics has been dominated by the question of Brexit. However, political debates over FCHW have not gone away and are integrally related to political differences over the role of the state and economic policies. One of the reasons that Labour did much better than expected in the snap election called by Teresa May in 2017 was because of Labour's strong [support for the welfare state and the end of austerity](#). Labour remains [committed to ending child poverty](#) and enabling all children to reach their potential.

## 5. Summary of and learning on key drivers of the policy change

### 5.1 Key drivers and processes fostering change in different political situations

In one sense, the main driver fostering policy change in the late 1990s was the Labour Party's prior commitment to social democracy and their recognition that poverty is a social problem that has structural causes and needs government intervention. Following their fourth consecutive defeat in 1992, the party reinvented itself and set up the Commission for Social Justice. The Commission recommended that it should become the party of social justice, serving the interests of all.

On becoming leader of the party in 1994, Tony Blair rebranded the party as *New Labour*, committed to social justice and rebuilding a welfare state decimated by 17 years of Conservative rule. This created a window of opportunity for FCHW policies. The window was expanded by left-leaning academics, policy think tanks, research groups and campaigning NGOs. Institutions overlapped and worked with the Labour Party in researching, publishing and campaigning for decades on the twin issues of women's right to work and all children's right to an early environment and education to enable them to achieve their potential. At the same time, there was pressure for married women to be persuaded (back) into work, amidst concern as to whether a shrinking workforce could cover the cost of an aging population. This gave rise to pressure for affordable quality childcare for economic reasons as well as social justice, and for promoting child wellbeing across the life course. The most powerful driver was probably the need to ensure that that all children grew up to be productive workers in a country with an aging population, justified by the high return on investment in children.

Labour's election victory in 1997 was partly due to the electorate's concerns about growing inequalities and the poor state of public services under successive Conservative governments. Once in office, the Labour government was able to pursue its policies for welfare reform, including reducing child poverty and providing ECEC, because, following a period of stagnation, the economy was buoyant, employment good and tax revenues rising. This enabled it to invest in public services and increase benefits and tax credits without raising taxation.

The situation changed dramatically in 2008, however, with the global economic crisis. By the late 2000s, the economy was depressed and government debt had increased. Citizens were more concerned about growing debt than public services; the Conservatives had managed to convince a majority of voters that the country's economic mess was due to profligate spending by the Labour government. In the changed economic situation, voters were more concerned about increased taxes than social justice. In the 2010 general election, the Conservatives campaigned on an austerity ticket. They promised that, if elected, their priority would be reducing government debt, which they argued was unsustainable, but that they would raise taxes to pay for public services.

The four main drivers of policy change when the Conservatives came to power in 2010 were: a perceived need to reduce public spending; the view that child poverty was due to the failings of individual parents; that the main way to reduce poverty was through social mobility; and the need to persuade married women to be active on the labour market. The Conservative government under Cameron rejected the Thatcherite view that the raising of children was a private matter for families with the state intervening only when children were at risk of serious harm. However, they held the traditional Conservative view that the main cause of child poverty was the failure of individual parents, shifting the focus from wider conditions to individual determinants.

They adopted policies that incentivised work by reducing the value of the benefits, and focused on policy options to build capabilities of children and parents. Unemployed and other *inadequate parents* were targeted to take part in parenting programmes. The main policy objective was not to lift children out of poverty but to build their capabilities, to enable them to do well enough in the education system that

they could gain decent employment when they left school. While strong support for ECEC continued, increasingly it was seen as a childcare service for working families rather than as giving children a good start in life; the main issue became not the quality but the quantity of service and its affordability. Thus, the Conservatives were more concerned about children's well-becoming than their wellbeing.

## 5.2 Learning and insights on generating change in different political situations

This section presents learning and insights on generating change in different political situations, including from key informants involved

**In raising and keeping the issue on the policy and political agenda:** The political and economic context shaped the issues raised. In the 1990s, the issues were different from those in the late 2000s, when the country faced different economic challenges. Another influence was political ideology: child poverty and ECEC were framed differently by Labour and Conservative governments. Reducing child poverty and providing ECEC remained firmly on the political and policy agenda under Labour because policy was being implemented over stages, with targets for reducing child poverty and for increasing ECEC provision. Powerful members of the Labour government, including the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer placed the issue of child wellbeing high on the agenda. After 2010, the issue of child wellbeing was to some extent lost with enabling mothers to work, parenting skills and social mobility prioritised. This was partly because of austerity economic policies and partly because the Conservatives favoured individualistic rather than structural explanations for child poverty.

**For the development and adoption of policy options:** The two main influences on the development and adoption of policy options were the economic situation and political ideology of the party in power. The Labour Party were able to develop and adopt policies because of the buoyant economy. As a social democratic party, it believed that poverty and disadvantage were mainly due to structural causes over which individuals have little control, and that there was a collective responsibility for the wellbeing of all children. The Conservatives, however, viewed poverty and disadvantage as the result of individual failings and, in the case of children, the failings of parents. Policy options adopted were informed by party ideologies. Both parties relied to some extent on political think tanks, academics and other policy experts to suggest options, and in the case of the Labour government policy advisors and senior civil servants to develop policy.

**In building political and public support and sustaining policy implementation:** The Labour party was able to sustain policy implementation because of large parliamentary majorities and a strong economy until 2008. Support for Labour in [the opinion polls](#) remained relatively strong until the 2008 economic crisis. Public support was built up for some of the policies they introduced, including the that mothers with young children should have paid employment, that all children should have access to ECEC, and that parents had a right to paid leave. These policies *fitted* with the employment agenda which had wide support. Two other policies that have survived are parenting education and the minimum wage. The former fits with the widely held view that children do badly because of poor parenting, and parenting education is relatively inexpensive.

The survival of the minimum wage is helped by the cost falling on employers, and there is strong support for employers not exploiting their workers. However, the shift from welfare benefits targeted at poor families to an increased wage floor for all low-paid workers shifts the focus away from child poverty and wellbeing. The *Sure Start* and *Children's Centres* were also popular with users, but they suffered severe cuts after 2010 because they were not backed by a sufficiently powerful coalition of voters to protect them when local authorities under financial pressure were looking to cut services. Labour also failed to build support for ending child poverty, and it has proved very hard to defend this policy in difficult economic times. In the 2000s, [coverage of poverty in the media](#) was peripheral and what coverage there was often reinforced negative stereotypes. Support for more spending on [welfare benefits](#) has been in decline since the 1990s but support for extra spending on children increased in the 2000s, though it has declined since 2010.



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## Endnotes

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- 2 See Loewenson and Masoty (2018) for information on the conceptual and analytic framework used.