

CHILD POVERTY SCRUTINY GUIDE

Your guide to the scrutiny of child poverty in
Wales



We Save the Children  Will you?

As Welsh local authorities and their partners face the challenge of tackling child poverty as part of their responsibilities under the Children and Young People's Plans, questions will inevitably be raised:

- **What does child poverty mean?**
- **What is the nature of child poverty in a particular area?**
- **How best can child poverty be reduced and prevented locally?**

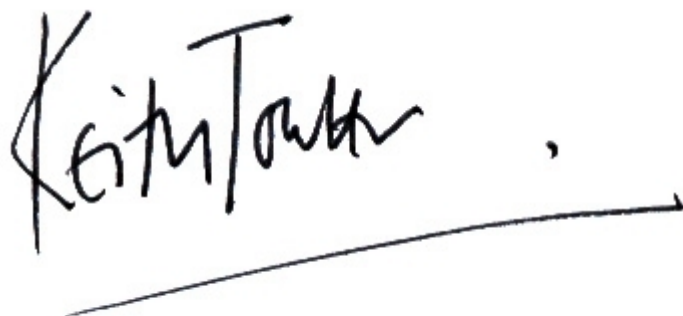
Foreword Children's Commissioner for Wales

As the new Children's Commissioner for Wales, I am continually reminded of the fact that too many children and young people in Wales are disadvantaged by poverty. With the recent increase of child poverty in Wales, it is now more important than ever for us all to work in partnership to tackle this issue. This will not be easy and it is crucial that local government works in partnership to eradicate child poverty by the UK Government's target of 2020.

Elected Members play a critical role in establishing child poverty as a political priority and providing local leadership and support to this demanding agenda. The role of non executive Members, through scrutiny, is also important in ensuring that robust policy is developed and that services deliver to families experiencing child poverty.

This Child poverty scrutiny guide, developed as a part of the Child Poverty Solutions website, aims to help those on scrutiny committees develop their work in ensuring that child poverty is driven down locally. It provides practical advice to Members and their Scrutiny Officers on work programming, policy development and review, performance management and on holding the executive to account. More importantly it provides a framework for conducting an in depth child poverty scrutiny review and provides a list of key Welsh expert witnesses who may be able to assist in the work.

I encourage you to use this guide and start scrutinising how your council intends to tackle child poverty.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Keith Towner". The signature is written in a cursive style. Below the signature is a long, thin horizontal line that tapers slightly at the right end.

Children's Commissioner for Wales

Introduction

This guide aims to assist councillors and scrutiny officers in carrying out child poverty scrutiny.

Many people believe there is very little child poverty in Wales today.

ONE IN FOUR Welsh children and young people have their daily lives blighted by child poverty. After a decline in child poverty in the early 2000's child poverty in Wales is on the **increase** once more.

Childhood experience lays the foundations for later life. Growing up in poverty can damage child development (mental, emotional, physical and social) and effects on outcomes in adult life. The costs of child poverty are great and go well beyond the individual:

- Poor children tend to have lower educational attainment. Low skills and productivity will stunt the local economy.
- Child poverty impacts greatly on communities. Increased deprivation and inequalities reduce social cohesion.
- Responding to the damaging effects of child poverty places costs on Council Tax payers because of the extra services needed to cope.

With the introduction of the Children and Young People's Plan councils and their partners face major challenges in helping to meet the UK government's target of eradicating child poverty by 2020. Scrutiny can help to determine how well councils and their partners are responding to this extremely challenging agenda. In examining good practice from elsewhere scrutiny can also be useful in developing policy and practice.

Scrutiny can make an important contribution to improve how partnerships deliver in the reduction of child poverty by:

- Conducting an overarching review of child poverty.
- Conducting a scrutiny review on a specific related issue e.g. (benefits administration).
- Regularly monitoring and challenging performance.
- Working with the executive to develop and review policy.
- Influencing decision makers with evidence based recommendations.
- Bringing in the views and evidence of those affected.
- Encouraging joined up thinking across traditional departmental barriers to avoid 'silo working'.
- Ensuring scrutiny work programmes include issues that are likely to have an impact on tackling child poverty.

The benefits of child poverty scrutiny

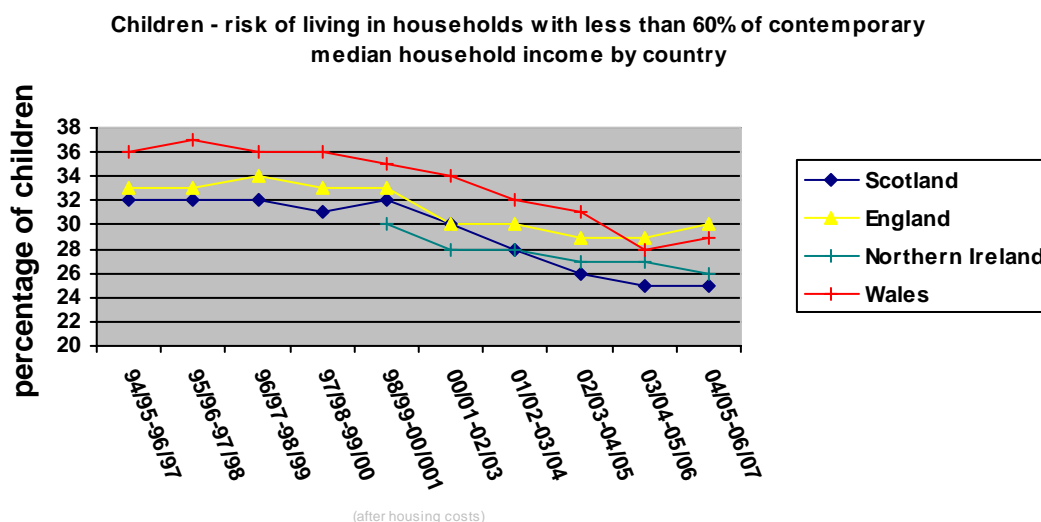
- Scrutiny enables non-executive members to address complex and sensitive service issues by influencing the decision making process.
- Scrutiny committees spend time in gathering information and hearing from a range of witnesses: Executives may not have the time to research in such depth.
- Scrutiny, done well, is an outward looking process. Through different ways of hearing evidence, scrutiny offers an opportunity for communities, groups, employees, service users and partners to make their voices heard and influence policy.
- Child poverty scrutiny can influence wider council policies and strategies, such as social inclusion, children's services and the community strategy to help prioritise child poverty.
- The children affected by child poverty are often hard to reach and may feel marginalised: the scrutiny process can use innovative ways of engaging those people who are directly affected by the council's and other agencies strategies and services.
- Scrutiny has a significant role in improving performance and in identifying gaps in service delivery.
- Scrutiny and overview help shape future policies as well as examine existing services. They can address strategic as well as operational issues, and can help the Authority to develop longer term policies that focus on prevention.
- Scrutiny and overview have a significant role in the development of joint working with other public sector agencies, particularly the NHS, the private sector and the community and voluntary sectors. This is especially important given the key role of joint working in providing services for vulnerable families. Scrutiny can also monitor the effectiveness of such joint working.
- Scrutiny re-emphasises to a council its responsibilities related to child poverty – particularly educational attainment, housing, community safety and benefits administration.
- Scrutiny can raise the profile of child poverty and the services tackling it both inside and outside the council.

What is child poverty?

There is no single, universally accepted standard definition of poverty, however the European Union's working definition of poverty is:

'Persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the Member State to which they belong'

Within the UK the most widely used measurement for child poverty is **Households Below Average Income (HBAI)**. HBAI uses "Children – risk of living in households with less than 60% of contemporary median income" as the measure.



The Welsh Assembly Government has split child poverty into three areas:

Income poverty

Low income denies children opportunities. Children and adults agree that more sustainable job opportunities are the main route out of poverty.

Participation poverty

Children from poor families often feel left out of activities others enjoy. This can be even more acute for disabled and ethnic minority children. The Welsh Assembly Government are working to ensure that all children can participate fully in play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities as well as the full range of learning opportunities. Our plans are set out in the paper: "Children and Young People; Rights to Action."³

Service poverty

Children and young people living in poor households experiencing difficulties in accessing and benefiting from quality services e.g. housing, leisure, childcare etc.

¹ Dennis, I. (2003) [European Union countries practice on relative poverty measurement](#), NSCB

² DWP (2008) Households Below Average Income An analysis of the income distribution 1994/95 – 2006/07 @ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/10_06_08poverty.pdf

³ Welsh Assembly Government (2000) Children and young people: rights to action

Who is at risk?

The Department for Works and Pensions state that the following groups are at risk of child poverty:⁴

- Children in **lone-parent families** are much more likely to live in low-income households than those in families with two adults. However, there has been a reduction in the risk of relative low income for children in lone-parent families since 1996/97.
- Children in **workless families** are much more likely to live in low income households than those with one or more adults in full-time work.
- Children in **large families** – those with three or more children – are more likely to live in low-income households, although the risk of relative low income for this group has decreased since 1996/97.
- Children in **families containing someone who is disabled** are more likely to live in low-income households than those in families with no disabled person if they were not in receipt of disability benefits.
- Children living in a family headed by someone from an **ethnic minority** are more likely to live in low-income households. This was particularly the case for those headed by someone of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin, where the majority of children are in households below 60 per cent of median income.
- Children in low income and material deprivation were more likely to live in **social rented sector housing** and workless households. Their family was also more likely to receive income support or housing benefit. Children in the two lowest quintiles of the income distribution are most likely to lack a week's holiday away from home, because their families could not afford to provide this.

⁴ Ending Child Poverty: Everybody's Business 2008 DWP

Policy links

The Welsh Assembly Government is driving forward a cross cutting agenda for improving the lives of children and young people, based on partnership working and implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. All policies and programmes for children and young people are required to contribute to seven core aims that summarise these rights. Core aim 7 states that we must ensure children and young people in Wales are not disadvantaged by poverty.

The UK Government's targets to halve child poverty by 2010/11 on the way to eradication by 2020 remain and the Assembly Government has re-affirmed - through the 'One Wales' agreement - its commitment to the targets. Tackling child poverty in all its forms is complex and cross-cutting. It requires strong partnership working across the public and private sectors. Whilst a substantial number of the key levers are reserved for/by the UK Government there is much that can be done in Wales by the Assembly Government and its key partners to help achieve the shared child poverty objectives and make a significant contribution to improving the life chances of the most disadvantaged children.

Welsh Assembly Government policy in this area has been shaped in recent years by the report of the independent Child Poverty Task Group in June 2004; the Child Poverty Strategy, 'A Fair Future for our Children', published in February 2005 and by the proposals set out in the Child Poverty Implementation Plan, published in May 2006. Using a Written Statement published on 20 February 2008 the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government confirmed that Ministers were aware of the need to continue to build on the impetus of efforts in Wales and that future Assembly Government action will focus on three strands:

- Strand 1 - Improving life opportunities for disadvantaged children.
- Strand 2 - Financial inclusion initiatives.
- Strand 3 - Encouraging greater uptake of the UK Government tax and benefits support.

Different Approaches to child poverty scrutiny

Scrutiny of child poverty can vary from a council/partnership wide review to focussing on a specific area of child poverty such as reviewing child care.

Overarching review

Due to its cross cutting nature child poverty scrutiny can be a complex task. Several councils have or are about to undertake overarching reviews that tend to focus on the corporate/strategic approach to child poverty reduction (e.g. leadership and governance, policy development, partnership working, performance management, capacity and resource management).

The table below summarises the overarching scrutiny taking place

Local Authority



Scrutiny review

An over arching scrutiny review of the partnership approach to reducing child poverty within the framework of the children and young people's plan.



Strategic scrutiny review testing the response of key council service areas to child poverty and the partnership approaches to child poverty reduction.



A scrutiny review examining council action to address child poverty focussing on the children and young people's plan, partnership working and accessibility and child care.



Review of the council's approach to addressing child poverty.

Specific Review

A more limited review can also help to address child poverty issues:

Local Authority



Scrutiny Review

Child poverty review focussing on key services that have significant potential to be part of the solution to this complex problem.



A review of benefits administration which is key to maximising family income.

Planning an over-arching child poverty review

However the review is planned it is recommended that you take logical steps to ensure that your review is successful. You will need to:

- Have a clear rationale for placing it on the work programme.
- Develop and agree clear, realistic terms of reference.
- Develop a robust project plan:
 - identifying how to involve children and young people,
 - identifying internal and external experts,
 - ensuring members are able to comment on the project plan.
- Develop good witness preparation arrangements.

We have developed some resources utilising good practice in Newham and Rhondda Cynon Taff that may be of use to the planning of a review.

Appendix 1 provides you with an example of a **child poverty project plan**. Appendix 2 is a list of useful **external witnesses** which may be able to assist in the review of child poverty

Appendix 3 is a list of **local officers/staff** who should be involved in an overarching review of child poverty.

The IDeA Children's services toolkit identifies several approaches which may help in framing your scrutiny review.

Work programming

As noted earlier there are a range of areas within the council's remit which impact on local child poverty. Placing these issues on scrutiny committee work programs can help assure service improvement and ultimately improve outcomes for children and young people.

Appendix 4 highlights a list of potential **scrutiny agenda items** and it is important to scrutinise them, please note that the list is not exhaustive:

Policy development and review

Scrutiny committees have a role to play in helping to develop and reviewing policies. Within most council's the Children and Young People's Plan will be the main driver for tackling child poverty.

In scrutinising a particular policy which may be relevant to child poverty it might be useful to use the **policy check list** at appendix 5 to satisfy yourself that it does not adversely affect those families known to be at risk of experiencing child poverty.

Monitoring and challenging performance

Scrutiny can have a significant role in improving performance. Most scrutiny Committees in Wales have regular reporting of performance relevant to their terms of reference. By placing an emphasis on scrutinising indicators that relate to child poverty scrutiny members will be able to drive improvement through the challenge of performance in key areas such as benefits administration, education, and housing. As with most indicators it is important to get behind the figures to get the full picture on performance (need to explain what is meant be "get behind the figures". Appendix 6 below highlights the types of indicators which have some relevance to the child poverty agenda. Please note that the list is not exhaustive and there may be locally developed indicators that provide additional performance information.

A more comprehensive list of child poverty indicators will be available from the Welsh Assembly Governments Child Well-being Monitor which will be available in November.

Hearing the voices of those affected by child poverty

Scrutiny, done well, is an outward looking process. Through different ways of hearing evidence, scrutiny offers an opportunity for communities, groups, employees, service users and partners to make their voices heard and influence policy. This is of particular importance for those affected by poverty and disadvantage as their voices are often not heard.

Several councils in Wales have effective youth forum, school councils, youth participation mechanisms and officers who could link with the relevant scrutiny committee to ensure that the voices of vulnerable children and young people are heard.

For an example of how this works in practice please visit the Idea web site or contact save the children for advice.

Making recommendations

It is crucial that scrutiny committees handle their reports and recommendations sensitively and effectively. Scrutiny committees will present their reports to the council's executive, but some committees will go further. Committees could invite back everyone who had given evidence or been consulted to feedback key points. Final reports should, if relevant, be distributed to all interested organisations, not just to the executive. Monitoring or follow up meetings should be scheduled to ensure that the executive accountable and has effectively responded.

Conclusion

The scrutiny of child poverty whether it relates to strategy or service delivery can impact positively in many ways. It can:

- raise the profile of services that tackle child poverty,
- increase the understanding of the issues for staff and councillors,
- help the council respond to the needs of the most vulnerable,
- ensure that the voices of those most affected are heard,
- help contribute to improved partnership working; and
- in the long term, help contribute to reduce the costs associated with child poverty.

Appendix I: Example of a child poverty review structure

PROPOSED TOPIC: REDUCING CHILD POVERTY IN	
Proposed DRAFT Terms of Reference	<p>To investigate the robustness of the Council's approach to the reduction of child poverty by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gaining an understanding of definitions of poverty, including its causes and impact • establishing an understanding of the national context, including causes of child poverty on a national level and central government's strategies and priorities in addressing poverty • identifying the key causes of child poverty at a local level and the type of barriers local residents face in getting out of poverty • identifying the council's response to tackling child poverty and assess its effectiveness (including the work of our partners) • investigating good practice in other areas
Meetings required	
Meeting 1	<p>Scope Inquiry Report and presentations providing background information on child poverty highlighting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is child poverty defined? (UK and WAG definitions) • What are the key causes of child poverty? • Policy Drivers (National and Local)
Meeting 2	<p>Child poverty in</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – To receive briefing from children and young people on their experiences. (organised by CYP Participation Worker) – Invite a presentation on the child poverty indicators within
Meeting 3	<p>Child poverty in the Council's response Part 1 Round table discussion that aims to gain an improved understanding of the council's corporate approach to addressing child poverty:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the Council define child poverty? • Which groups of families are currently in poverty? Who is most at risk? • What are the key causes of child poverty in • What kind of barriers do families face in attempting to get out of poverty? • How is the council addressing child poverty? What are the key strategies and initiatives in place? How is the council working together with its partners? • Is the council using all the levers at its disposal to reduce child poverty? • How is progress measured? What are the child poverty targets?
Meeting 4	<p>Child poverty and Council Services Round table discussion from those providing services to residents living in, and affected by, poverty. Services will be selected in line with the key causes of child poverty in the borough:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is child poverty defined by the service and what of issues do residents present with? • What are the key barriers preventing residents from accessing services? • What works well when working with partners in tackling child poverty and providing the right services to our residents? What could be improved?
Meeting 5	<p>Partnership working Round Table discussions with some of the council's key partners in tackling child poverty:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What your organisation considers as the key issues/ priorities around child poverty in.....? • How your organisation supports people affected by poverty/ child poverty? • How your organisation works with the council and other partners to address poverty/ child poverty? • What is working well? How is progress measured? What could be improved?
Meeting 6	<p>Good Practice In addressing child poverty Local site visit Practices example from elsewhere</p>
Meeting 7	Consideration of draft report/recommendations

Appendix 2: Useful External Witnesses

Witness	Area of Expertise
<p>Anne Crowley Save the Children Tel: 029 20396838 Email: A.Crowley@savethechildren.org.uk</p>	<p>Child poverty policy Community Regeneration</p>
<p>WLGA Emily Warren Tel: 029 2046 8600 Email: emily.warren@WLGA.GOV.UK</p>	<p>Child poverty policy Health inequalities</p>
<p>Victoria Winkler Bevan Foundation Tel: 01495 725214 Email: victoria.winckler@bevanfoundation.org</p>	<p>Social Justice Think Tank</p>
<p>Sean O'Neil Children In Wales Tel: 029 2034 2434 Email: sean.oneill@childreninwales.org.uk</p>	<p>Child poverty policy Child poverty and education</p>
<p>Sam Clutton Barnados Tel: 01639 620945 Email: sam.clutton@barnardos.org.uk</p>	<p>Child poverty</p>
<p>Pete Mackie Shelter Cymru Tel: 01792 469400 Email: PeterM@sheltercymru.org.uk</p>	<p>Child poverty and Housing</p>
<p>Jonathan Edwards Citizens Advice Bureau Tel: 029 2037 6757 Email: Jonathan.Edwards@citizensadvice.org.uk</p>	<p>Information on debt, benefits, housing, legal, discrimination, employment, immigration, consumer and other problems</p>
<p>Tracy Breheny Welsh Assembly Government Tel: 01685 729309/01656 661634 Email: tracey.breheny@wales.gsi.gov.uk</p>	<p>WAG Child poverty policy</p>
<p>Viv Lang NCH Tel: 029 2022 2127 Email: vivienne.laing@nch.org.uk</p>	<p>Disability and child poverty</p>
<p>Sara Aitken National Public Health Service Wales Tel: 01495 332198 Email: sarah.aitken@nphs.wales.nhs.uk</p>	<p>Health inequalities and child poverty</p>

Appendix 3: Local Officers/experts

Witness	Area of Expertise
Leader	Useful in gauging the overall commitment to child poverty
Council Chief Executive	Useful in gauging the overall commitment to child poverty
Lead Executive Member	Useful in testing the level of knowledge and overall commitment to reducing child poverty
Senior Officers responsible for Housing, Finance, Education, Social Services, Leisure & Economic Development.	Useful in gaining service area perceptions of child poverty, joint working arrangements and practice. Financial costs of child poverty and the cost of tackling child poverty
Job Centre Plus Child Care Co-ordinators	Key partners in delivering on the worklessness and child poverty agenda.
Voluntary sector	Local voluntary sector agencies will work with the most at risk and can provide some useful information on the local context, the level of partnership working and may be able to help in bringing local voices to the scrutiny
Communities First Coordinators	Useful in examining what is needed to strengthen the links between the communities first and children and young people's partnerships in reducing child poverty.
Housing Associations	There is a strong relationship between living in social housing and child poverty. Housing associations can assist in exploring the links and interventions to help tackle child poverty.
Chief Executive Local Health Board / Trust	Useful in ascertaining the partnership working between health and the council on child poverty related issues
Community Safety Partnership Coordinator/ representative	Useful in ascertaining the joint working arrangements with children and young people's partnership on child poverty related issues and how local community safety issues relates to child poverty.

Appendix 4: Suggested Scrutiny Work Programme Topics:

Topic	Why important
Benefits administration	Good benefits administration performance can have a significant impact in tackling poverty and providing opportunity, whereas poor performance restricts opportunity and leaves people facing financial problems.
The coordination of debt, benefits advice and take up.	Lack of appropriate professional debt advice can adversely affect participation and access to services.
Worklessness	The government states that the best route out of poverty is work. There may be high levels of worklessness in your area. Scrutiny of the partnership approach to reducing worklessness may lead to more effective working practice.
Improving housing quality	Children living in poor quality housing are more likely to have bad health, no quiet space for homework and high levels of stress. Scrutiny of delivery on the Wales housing quality standard can help drive forward change for these children.
Homelessness strategy	Homeless families and young people are more likely to suffer from poor mental health and lack opportunities. A review of the effectiveness of the Homelessness strategy can contribute to improvement.
Education and child poverty	Education achievement is key to lifting people out of poverty. Wales has a particularly high proportion (14%) of 16 year olds getting no GCSEs. (JRF 2007). There is a clear link between child poverty and low educational achievement demonstrated in Wales.
Education welfare services	Children who live in poverty are more likely to be absent from school – whether through absence, truancy, suspension or exclusion. Lack of attendance at school has also been shown to be the trigger for an escalating rate of crime and disaffection. It has been estimated that the true cost of an individual permanent exclusion may be in excess of £300,000.
Community schooling and child poverty	Extra curricular activity for the most vulnerable children and young people has been found to have a positive impact on children and young people experiencing poverty. Scrutinising whether the arrangements for community schooling are inclusive.
Engaging parents in education	Parental involvement in education in the form of ‘at-home good parenting’ has a significant positive effect on children’s achievement, this is particularly important at the primary age range. Unfortunately, parental involvement is strongly influenced by poverty, scrutinising the council’s approach to parental engagement with schooling may help in getting a more robust approach.

Appendix 4 (continued): Suggested Scrutiny Work Programme Topics:

Topic	Why important
Councils approach to training (including basic Skills) low paid workers.	Low pay is the largest direct cause of in work poverty. In Wales the public sector still accounts for 23% of all those in low pay. Staff training can assist in increasing the earning capacity of staff but is often targeted at the highest paid. The scrutiny of this issue may assist in re-addressing this balance.
HR recruitment policies and practice.	Recruitment practices and policies can often act as a barrier to employment for individuals with complex issues relating to poverty. The level of council apprenticeships and job centre plus engagement is also important.
Outreach Services	Outreach services have been found to be an effective means of delivering services to hard to reach families.
Fuel poverty	Councils have a responsibility to produce plans that aim to reduce fuel poverty and increase energy efficiency. Reviewing these plans may help in the targeting of services to the most vulnerable families.
Health inequalities	There is a direct link between health inequalities and poverty.
Transport, learning, work and out of school activities	The availability of transport is a significant barrier to work and learning. Scrutinising the regional and local transport planning arrangements will help ascertain the linkages and levels of provision in deprived wards.
Responding to the assessment of childcare sufficiency	The availability of affordable, flexible child care for working families is a key plank in the UK government's strategy to reduce child poverty.
Basic skills	There are high numbers of people with low basic skills in Wales. Lack of basic skills such as numeracy and literacy limits learning opportunities and is a major barrier to employment.
NEETS (Not in education, employment or training)	Young people from poorer backgrounds are more than twice as likely to drop out and be NEET at age 19, making a successful transition to work more difficult. 10% of 16 year olds are not in education, training or employment in Wales. The estimated cost of a NEET is £97,000 per person over a lifetime.
The involvement of CYP in communities first	Involving children and young people in communities first partnerships brings benefits to the young people and their communities. The levels of young people's participation in communities first partnerships is limited, scrutinising the approach could act as a catalyst for change.
Road safety in deprived areas	The risks of a child having an accident on the roads is far greater in deprived areas.

Appendix 5: Policy Checklist

Has the Officer responsible for the policy:	YES	NO	POSSIBLY
Considered the local data in relation to child poverty.			
<p>Considered its possible impact on to those groups who have been identified as being most vulnerable to child poverty e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lone parent families • Families with large numbers of children • Families with a someone who has a disability • Children in couple families where one adult works part-time • Workless and unemployed families • Families with mothers who have no qualifications • People experiencing rural disadvantage • People experiencing urban child poverty • Homeless families and young people • Migrants and ethnic minorities 			
The impact of any possible service charges on the most vulnerable?			
Whether it conflicts with other policies that aim to reduce child poverty			
Developed an implementation plan that effectively addresses the needs of the most vulnerable.			
Developed a robust performance monitoring arrangements.			
Consulted all relevant stakeholders			
Sought examples of good practice in this area and considered the approaches of other Authorities to tackling this issue			
Taken account of the financial implications of the policy			

Appendix 6: Child poverty indicator list

Indicator
Worklessness
Benefits administration
Percentage of achievement (no GCSE, GNVQ or ELQ)
Percentage of pupils entitled to free school meals
Overall absenteeism by pupils of compulsory secondary school age in maintained secondary and special schools
Percentage of school sessions missed due to unauthorised absence (secondary)
Overall absenteeism by pupils (primary schools)
Percentage of school sessions missed due to unauthorised absence (primary schools)
The number of homeless families with children who have used bed and breakfast accommodation during the year except in emergencies
The number of new affordable housing units provided during the year as a percentage of all new housing units provided during the year