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Monday 30 June 2014

Dear Sir/Madam,

**Re: 4Children's Response to All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty**

4Children welcomes the opportunity to comment on the all-party "*Hunger and Food Poverty*" consultation. 4Children is the national charity all about children and families. We have spearheaded a joined-up, integrated approach to children's services and work with a wide range of partners around the country to ensure children and families have access to the services and support they need in their communities. We run Children's Centres as well as family and youth services across Britain, including nurseries and childcare provision. We develop, influence and shape national policy on all aspects of the lives of children, young people and families.

In this brief response however, we wish to discuss two further issues which we believe have major implications for broader issues linked to living standards, linked to evidence received by the committee which has shown that the rising costs of housing, food and fuel have had an adverse impact on households' ability to buy and cook meals. These are:

- The need for high quality local services for families
- The need to build stronger communities for our children and families to grow up in

In the following sections we set out measures that, in our view, would make important contributions in these two areas and lead to significant wider improvements in living standards for UK families.

**The need for high quality local services for families**

In addition to the pressures that families experience as a result of rising bills and costs, the quality of the services that they use is a hugely important part of their daily life. 4Children firmly believes that service provision is most effective for children and families when it is delivered using what we term a "whole family" approach, with different services fully integrated to ensure a seamless and coherent offer for families.

The experience in the earliest years of life is known to have a strong bearing on a person's long-term outcomes, and needs to be a particular focus for tackling food poverty. The Chief Medical Officer has highlighted how mental health problems in children and young people are often persistent; and strongly linked to social disadvantage and adversity. Frank Field's report from 2010 on the Foundation Years shows that the poorest 20% of children are more likely to display conduct problems at age five, and those from the lowest socio-economic quintile are more likely to engage in risky behaviours such as smoking, anti-social behaviours and playing truant that are also known to persist into later life.

In 4Children's view, developing the Sure Start Children's Centre network represents the ideal opportunity to realise this "whole family" approach in practice, and we are advocating the transformation of Centres into broader Community Hubs, which will provide a wide range of services to children with families across the age range, from conception all the way up to age 19.

Hubs would build on and enhance existing Children's Centres, and be open to all families as well as providing specialist services for those children and families who need extra help. They would bring together and co-ordinate services – from midwives and health visitors to childcare, out of school and youth support. Universal advice and activities would mean Centres are there for everyone, with specialist help on hand for families with greater needs – help with parenting, debt and housing and support to tackle many of the underlying issues of family crisis such as domestic abuse, alcohol and drug addiction and poor mental health for families struggling to cope. This would include support linked to the cost of living, as well as the ability of a family to feed themselves in a nutritionally beneficial way.

In order to achieve this transformation in the Children's Centre network, we believe the following are amongst the steps that should take place:

- **Place Children's Centres on a statutory footing:** Making sure they grow at the heart of every community, acting as a 'hub' for support and advice, and bringing together and co-ordinating services, from midwives and health visitors to childcare and out-of-school support, from conception to school and beyond.
- **Building on Every Child Matters by placing Hubs at the heart of "whole family", integrated approach.** Making Hubs pioneers of a wider "whole family" approach, bringing together and co-ordinating a broad range of support to enable wider services to work with the whole family in a coherent and joined-up way. They have the potential to build on the principles of Every Child Matters with a new articulation and demonstration of integrated support.
- **Give power to people:** By using a developed and enhanced role for Hubs to re-shape and modernise public services in partnership with communities and users. The most recent edition of 4Children's "Children's Centre Census" shows a significant increase in community engagement and volunteering in Centres.<sup>1</sup>
- **Put Hubs at the heart of a shift towards a culture of "Early Intervention":** Children's Centres achieve most at the heart of an early intervention strategy, with targeted support linked in when crisis hits, working with troubled families, child protection and social care. Children's Centres should provide specialist help for families with greater needs, tackling many of the underlying causes of illness and family crisis early – help with parenting, debt and housing, as well as support to tackle many of the underlying issues of family crisis such as domestic abuse, alcohol and drug addiction and poor mental health for families.

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<sup>1</sup> 4Children (2013) [Children's Centre Census 2013](#), p. 28-30

- **Put Hubs at the heart of a children and family public health strategy:** Maximising the potential of integration with Health and Wellbeing Boards to provide universal ante- and post-natal support with a guarantee of outreach midwives and health visitor's support in and around Centres. A wide public-health focus will include wider issues linked to nutrition and healthy eating for the family at all stages of life.

By building on the Children's Centre network to develop Community Hubs, 4Children believes that there is a significant opportunity to achieve better, more coherent service provision for the UK's families, and drive real improvements in living standards as a result.

### **Tackling child poverty**

The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission's 2013 "State of the Nation" report estimates that on current trends the targets set in the Child Poverty Act 2010 for eradicating child poverty by 2020 will not be achieved, with as many as two million children remaining in relative poverty by that time. As in our response to the Government's recent consultation on their child poverty strategy for 2014-17, 4Children believes tackling broader child poverty strategy should include three core components:

- 1) Enhancing the role of Children's Centres, as already outlined, placing these at the heart of providing services and support for all children and families
- 2) "Breaking the cycle": adopting an intergenerational approach that underpins all interventions for children and families
- 3) Making life more affordable for children and families: over the next 10 years, establishing a universal childcare guarantee for all children aged 0-14, and developing a major programme of building to create affordable social housing

"Tackling poverty now" and "tackling the drivers of intergenerational poverty" are two inter-related and interconnected problems that need to be addressed in a holistic and co-ordinated way. Early action needs to be at the heart of this, as tackling problems at an early stage to prevent them from becoming far more significant crises later on not only has a beneficial impact now, but also improves outcomes over the long-term. 4Children has a unique perspective in delivering family services in a holistic, life-changing way. The "whole family" model developed by 4Children sets out the approach that we believe will make a real difference to the lives of these vulnerable children:

1. By 'breaking the cycle' of intergenerational problems through holistic family support
2. Through early intervention, before problems turn into crisis
3. By offering "turnaround" support for those families and individuals in crisis (which is an inevitable point, even with early intervention measures in place, some will reach)

There is strong evidence of the social and economic benefits of this approach and we believe it should be firmly embedded in final published Strategy, identifying, implementing and appropriately resourcing specific early action and early intervention measures which have the capacity to drive reductions in the level of child poverty.

## Universal childcare

The provision of affordable, high-quality childcare is a particularly effective policy lever for addressing child poverty, as it not only supports parents to return to employment, progress in work, or work more hours, but can also make an important contribution to children's development. In the Department for Education's recent "Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents" half of mothers said that having reliable childcare would be the most helpful factor in allowing them to go to work, while 54% of non-working mothers agreed that they would prefer to work if they had quality childcare which was convenient, reliable and affordable. Lack of information on childcare was seen as a barrier to by 44% of lone parents and 38% of couples with dependent children.

In our recently published policy paper "The Childcare Guarantee", 4Children has called for a radical change in the way that childcare is provided, to build a new system that is responsive to families, and helps underpin moves to reduce current and intergenerational child poverty in a holistic and integrated way. We believe there is a particular need for:

- A ten-year staged plan to deliver a universal and affordable guarantee of 0-14 childcare by 2025
- An extension of the number of free childcare hours over the next ten years, so that 25 hours of free early education is available for all children aged 1-4, with parents paying for extra hours if required

If you would like to discuss any of the points raised in this response in more detail, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



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