

Response from: Prof. Rod Hick, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University

Introduction

1. In 2022, as part of the recent Wales Centre for Public Policy review on poverty and social exclusion in Wales, Peter Kenway and colleagues published a report entitled '*What makes an anti-poverty strategy effective?*'¹ This review suggests that the purpose of a poverty strategy is to galvanise action where this might otherwise not occur, to maintain poverty as a high policy priority and to provide a framework for action for those who wish to act against poverty.² More generally, this review provides a helpful and evidence-informed view about the efficacy of anti-poverty strategies.
2. In my view, to be effective an anti-poverty strategy should be ambitious in relation to its anti-poverty aims, appropriately specific in order to concentrate attention and action yet should retain enough flexibility so as to maintain relevance in changing contexts. The pandemic and cost-of-living crisis remind us that contexts can change rapidly; in the context of devolution, discussion about the desirability of the scope of devolved powers can evolve. A good strategy should provide a clear but flexible roadmap to guide action against poverty.

The scale of child poverty in Wales

3. The proportion of children living in poverty in Wales pre-pandemic was 31% (poverty measured After Housing Costs for the period 2017/18 – 2019-20), marginally above the UK average of 30%. The most recent year for which data is available is 2019/20 – 2021/22, where child poverty rate is 28%, marginally below the national average (which was, again, 30%).³
4. Even when averaging over rolling three-year periods, four-nation child poverty estimates have quite large confidence intervals and minor changes over time, and the comparison of small differences between places, should be treated with caution. What is clear is that a substantial proportion of children in Wales are living in poverty and that this proportion is at-or-around the average for the UK as a whole.

The five objectives

5. The five headline objectives relate to issues of significance for the levels and experiences of child poverty in Wales. If the associated descriptions

¹ Kenway, P., Ayrton, C., Chandran, C. and Tortajada, I. (2022), [What makes an effective anti-poverty strategy?](#), Cardiff, Wales Centre for Public Policy.

² Ibid, p. 44 & p. 39.

³ Households Below Average Income, 1994/5 – 2021/22 series, Table 4.16ts: Percentage of children living in households with less than 60 per cent of contemporary median income, by region and country, United Kingdom.

under these objections were comprehensive and if the priority areas suitably aligned and focussed, they could provide the basis for an effective anti-poverty strategy.

6. The objectives are presented in a sensible order. Objective 1 focusses on particularly important mechanisms to reduce child poverty in Wales and should undoubtedly be a priority (Q2). Indeed, it is good to see that reducing costs and maximising incomes has been given greater (implicit) priority as Objective 1, when compared with the 2015 Strategy.
7. Objective 2, on facilitating pathways out of poverty,⁴ is also highly important (Q4). We know that entries into employment are very important triggers of poverty exits⁵ and it is good to see these emphasised here. From the description associated with this objective, we can see that it is conceived in comprehensive terms, reflecting the many policies that are associated with routes to exit poverty. The priorities in relation to this objective (see below) are not quite so comprehensive, but this might be justified as representing appropriate focus of priority actions.
8. Objective 3 (supporting well-being) has value but, as currently articulated, is the least clear and coherent objective (Q6). For example, housing features prominently in the engagement account ('What we have heard') and in that of actions ("What we are doing about it?"). The evidence base supports such an emphasis. In many Europe countries, renters face higher risks of poverty than owners and this differential is in most countries increasing.⁶ But this emphasis on housing does not feature in the associated Priority. More generally, there can be multiple influences on well-being, but the description does not really give a clear account of which are believed to be the most important. The risk is that Objective 3 is not sufficiently clear to guide policy attention and to inform action.
9. Objective 4 (Treatment, dignity and respect) relates to an important and neglected issue and is a welcome inclusion to the headline objectives (Q8). There may be a challenge in measuring progress against this objective, however, and it will be important to ensure that the emphasis placed on this issue by elevating it to a headline objective is translated into tangible action in terms of improvements to service delivery.
10. Objective 5 (cross-government working) is presented both as an end in itself and as a means to the other objectives ("If we are going to deliver against our objectives..."). It is welcome that working productively with UK government is mentioned here, given the significance of reserved social security powers for tackling child poverty. Reference is made to working

⁴ Hick, R. (2022), '[Promoting pathways out of poverty - and preventing the pitfalls of poverty entry](#)', Wales Centre for Public Policy blog, 30th September 2022.

⁵ Hick, R., & Lanau, A. (2017). In-work poverty in the UK: Problem, policy analysis and platform for action.

⁶ Hick, R., Pomati, M., & Stephens, M. (2022). Housing and poverty in Europe: Examining the interconnections in the face of rising house prices, Cardiff, Cardiff University.

with civil society and business, and to their significance for tackling poverty, though more could be said about existing modes of engagement with these actors are believed to be working and/or how they might need to change (Q10).

The related priorities

11. The priorities identified are mostly aligned with the associated objectives, though there is scope to articulate these priorities with greater specificity, to enable closer monitoring and evaluation. For instance, Priority 1 commits to ‘work at pace...to increase...provision’, to ‘press ahead’, and to ‘accelerate our work’, but it is not clear how policy action in these areas can be expected to change and how success when assessed against these priorities might be measured (Q3).
12. In some cases, some of the text contained under the priority headings re-states previous and/or ongoing activities rather than explicitly relating to the actions proposed to respond to the headline objectives.
13. Priority 2 aligns with Objective 2 in relation to employment-promotion, though is narrower in coverage than that objective (e.g. in relation to education). This may reflect legitimate prioritisation, but it is nonetheless notable. The commentary on employment inequalities would be better-placed in the preceding sections to the focus is more squarely on priority areas for action (or, this important issue might be distilled into a priority action in itself)(Q5).
14. Reflecting the less cohesive nature of Objective 3, Priority 3 could also do with further attention to ensure greater coherence across the Objective and Priority (Q7).
15. Priority 4 contains important commitments (Q9).
16. Priority 5 places appropriate emphasis on the Socio-Economic Duty. This priority makes welcome commitments regarding the sharing of expertise and best practice (Q11).

General observations (Q17).

17. The draft strategy is realistic about the scale of the challenge and about the significance of policy levers retained by UK government yet demonstrates the importance and possibility of lowering the incidence, and ameliorating the negative consequences, of poverty in Wales.
18. In the course of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, ad hoc decision-making by UK government has deepened a trend towards localism and has provided new funding for initiatives that can contribute towards tackling poverty. One reason for the call for greater specificity above is for the strategy to be able to fulfil the role of framework for action, that can be used to identify priority areas for action and

concentrate attention on specific aspects of the problem of poverty in an evolving political and economic context.

19. In relation to Objective and Priority 1, it was surprising that there was no mention of the Discretionary Assistance Fund, given the emphasis that has been placed on this in recent years. What conclusions have been drawn from the increased emphasis of this scheme, and what role will it play in future attempts to tackle poverty in Wales?
20. Discussion in relation to Objective 1 makes reference to the Welsh Benefits System. Research by the Bevan Foundation finds that awareness of some Welsh Benefits schemes is not high,⁷ suggesting that challenges exist in making people aware of the support that is available to them. The social security system is widely considered to be a highly complex policy institution and it will be important that, if greater emphasis is to be placed on devolved payments as they are integrated into one, notionally-simpler system, this does not lead to the appearance of greater complexity in the social security system. The further of evolution in devolved policy efforts in relation to social security has the potential to yield positive results, but the associating complexity will need to be managed.
21. Ongoing efforts to tackle poverty in Wales are likely to lead to discussions about the desirability of new powers and how they might be utilised and how existing powers might be used in new and imaginative ways. Both are likely to require enhancing institutional capacity and one aspect of this will be the need to ensure sufficient analytic capacity within Welsh Government. As a greater number of poverty-relevant powers are transferred and associated policies are developed, monitoring the progress of anti-poverty policies pursued in other nations and regions, perhaps most obviously the Scottish Child Payment, will become an increasingly-important task if policy levers are to be exercised effectively.

⁷ Bevan Foundation (2022), [A snapshot of poverty in summer 2022](#), Merthyr Tydfil, Bevan Foundation.