

All Party Parliamentary Group for Schools, Learning, and Assessment **and** All Party Parliamentary Group for Parents

The Missing Chapter Report and the Child Poverty Strategy

Meeting Minutes

Tuesday 25 March 2025 – 10:30am to 11:30am – Committee Room 18, Palace of Westminster

Parliamentarians in attendance

Peter Swallow MP, Chris Vince MP, Antonia Bance MP, Lord Hampton, Baroness Lister, Baroness O'Neill of Bexley (remote).

Guest speakers

Frank Young, Director of Research and Policy Parentkind

Ed Harlow, Vice President, NEU

Jonathan Capstick and Gillian Hudson, Child Poverty Unit

Agenda

10:30 – 10:35	Welcome to meeting and introductions (Peter Swallow MP)
10:35 – 10:40	Missing Chapter overview (Frank Young, Parentkind)
10:40 – 10:45	Missing Chapter overview (Ed Harlow, NEU)
10:45 – 10:55	Update on the Child Poverty Strategy (Jonathan Capstick and Gillian Hudson, Child Poverty Unit)
10:55 – 11:25	Discussion and Q&A (Chaired by Peter Swallow MP)
11:25 – 11:30	AOB (Chaired by Peter Swallow MP)

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed attendees and introduced the meeting as a special joint session of the Schools APPG and the APPG for Parents to discuss Parentkind’s new Missing Chapter Report, supported by the NEU, alongside the Government’s Child Poverty Strategy.

2. Missing Chapter Overview – Frank Young, Parentkind

Frank welcomed attendees and noted the strong turnout reflected the depth of concern about child poverty and its impact on families and schools. He introduced The Missing Chapter Report, published by Parentkind and supported by the NEU.

The report, based on a nationally representative survey of 2,000 parents living below the poverty line, found that families spent an average of £2,000 annually on additional school costs - around a quarter of the income for those on the lowest earnings. One in five parents reported skipping meals to cover these costs, and one in ten kept their children home due to financial hardship.

Frank also highlighted that one in six children were reported to experience bullying due to their family's financial situation, affecting around half a million pupils.

He concluded by outlining the six key recommendations from The Missing Chapter Report, urging the government to address them in the Child Poverty Strategy so they do not become a 'missing chapter':

- Recognise and commit to reducing the cost of schooling for parents in poverty.
- Set a measurable target to track cost reductions over time within the Child Poverty Strategy.
- Establish a government body to monitor progress and maintain focus on the issue.
- Provide free school meals for all primary school children.
- Support schools in becoming "poverty fighting schools" through initiatives that reduce daily costs for families.
- Recognise the role of PTAs as a social justice issue and provide targeted support for PTAs in disadvantaged areas to help distribute essential supplies.

3. Missing Chapter Overview – Ed Harlow, NEU

Ed introduced himself as a secondary school teacher with 20 years of experience. He emphasised the NEU's support for the government's commitment to a Child Poverty Strategy but stressed the need for real change, centring children's experiences in tackling poverty.

He highlighted the alarming rise in child poverty, with one in five schools now running food banks and recent figures showing that nine children in every class of thirty live in poverty - higher in areas of deprivation. NEU members report that many children arrive at school fatigued, hungry, and unable to concentrate. Four in five teachers regularly provide food for pupils from their own pockets, while many support staff are struggling to afford meals for their own families.

Ed warned that hidden school costs, coupled with school funding pressures, deepen inequalities. He called for urgent reforms to welfare policies, including the removal of the two child benefit cap, with 55% of children in families with three or more children now living in poverty. He also supported the call for universal free school meals and urged automatic enrolment to ensure no child goes hungry due to paperwork or stigma.

Ed concluded by urging the government to take decisive action, stressing that rising household incomes and adequate school funding are essential to breaking the cycle of poverty. He welcomed The Missing Chapter Report shining a light on these issues.

4. Update on the Child Poverty Strategy - Jonathan Capstick, Child Poverty Unit

Jonathan began by welcoming *The Missing Chapter Report* and its evidence based approach. He introduced himself as being on loan from the Department for Education, where he previously led the disadvantage strategy division. He is also school governor in a deprived area, acknowledging the pressures schools face due to rising poverty.

Jonathan outlined the progress of the Child Poverty Strategy, noting that the ministerial Child Poverty Task Force was established in July, with the strategy expected to be published around the spending review in spring.

He emphasised that the strategy is part of the government's Opportunity Mission, ensuring that a child's background does not limit their potential. There are four pillars of the strategy:

- Increasing incomes – Addressing financial stability for families.
- Reducing costs – Including school related costs, which have been debated in Parliament.
- Financial resilience – Helping families manage economic shocks.
- Local and community support – Strengthening social safety nets.

The taskforce has held monthly meetings since August, engaging with over 200 stakeholders and policy experts. The next phase involves finalising the strategy for publication in June.

5. Discussion and Q&A

Metrics and targets – Child Poverty Strategy

Antonia Bance MP asked for clarification on the baseline for measuring child poverty reductions under the government's strategy. She pointed out the time lag in child poverty statistics, which often arrive one to two years in arrears, and asked for clarity on the starting point for measuring progress and whether the government is setting a numerical target for poverty reduction.

Jonathan Capstick acknowledged the importance of the question and indicated that the baseline for measuring child poverty reductions is likely to be data from 2024/25. However, specifics - including exact targets and the scale of ambition – were still under discussion and will likely depend on funding decisions made in the Spending Review.

Spending review – Child Poverty Strategy

Baroness Lister asked when the child poverty strategy will be published before or after the Spending Review, seeking clarification on the relationship between the work being done and the Spending Review.

Jonathan responded that the strategy will almost certainly be published after the Spending Review. He clarified that while they hope to publish it quickly, likely within days of the review, the exact timing depends on the outcome of the review. He explained that much of the strategy's content depends on the funding settlements from individual departments. Due to this, it would not be feasible to publish the strategy before the Spending Review.

Housing – Child Poverty Strategy

Chris Vince MP asked how the child poverty strategy will engage with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and how it will address housing concerns.

Jonathan explained that the ministerial child poverty task force is chaired by the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, with other key departments involved, including those involved in housing, homelessness, and utility costs, as these are critical factors in addressing child poverty. The task force's focus is on influencing departmental bids for the Spending Review to ensure these issues are prioritised, working closely with the Treasury and ministers to ensure alignment.

Cuts to disability benefits – Child Poverty Strategy

Tammy Campbell (EPI) asked if the Child Poverty Unit is considering the impact on children of the cuts to disability benefits.

Jonathan explained that understanding the impact of changes to disability benefits (and other government policies) on child poverty is a key part of the Child Poverty Unit's work.

Commitments post spending review – Child Poverty Strategy

Chris Waterman asked whether, after gathering information from various departments there would be a "menu" of what each department will do in response to the strategy.

Jonathan confirmed that, in effect, the strategy would present clear commitments from departments. He explained that while the strategy is chaired by two Secretaries of State, it involves the full commitment of relevant departments, with all recommendations needing to pass through the cabinet committee structure. The strategy will not just be aspirational but will include actual commitments from departments, detailing their actions and funding post spending review.

Bullying due to poverty – Missing Chapter Report

Peter Swallow MP asked whether the Missing Chapter Report takes into account the way poverty affects communities differently and how best to tackle it in various contexts, particularly in relation to the statistic that one in ten children are bullied for being poor.

Frank Young (Parentkind) acknowledged the limitations of a poll based on 2,000 parents and the granularity it provides at a constituency level. He emphasised the challenge for headteachers in schools where poverty may not be as visibly prevalent but still impacts children's lives. He also noted that all children in poverty face hardships, regardless of location.

Ed Harlow (NEU) discussed the importance of universality in addressing poverty, specifically through universal free school meals. He explained that this approach aims to break down the stigma children might feel, whether through separate queues, mealtimes, or visible indicators like uniforms and shoes. The premise is that all children should eat together, which promotes cohesion and eliminates the identification of children as 'victims' of poverty.

School Uniforms – Missing Chapter Report

Lord Hampton brought up the topic of school uniforms, noting that it has been a headline issue, but he has heard that the mark up is only 7%.

Ed Harlow (NEU) acknowledged that there is a significant difference in how schools handle uniform policies. He shared an example from his children's primary school, where a simple, affordable uniform is required. However, Ed pointed out that some schools, particularly in MATs have very strict and costly uniform policies, including specific brands and types of shoes and bags, which can create financial pressure for parents.

6. AOB

The Chair thanked all for their attendance and reminded Parliamentarians about the Parliamentary Reception to mark the launch of the report on Wednesday 2nd April.