

'Our historic aim...  
to end child poverty forever...  
is a twenty year mission,  
but I believe it can be done'  
*Tony Blair, 18 March 1999*

**POVERTY  
IN A LAND  
OF PLENTY  
FIVE YEARS ON**

Special Anniversary Report for

**END CHILD POVERTY**

by **LISA HARKER**, with **CLAIRE KOBER** and **JONATHAN STEARN**

# POVERTY IN A LAND OF PLENTY

**O**N 18 MARCH 1999 Tony Blair made the most significant domestic policy commitment of his political career.

'Our historic aim' he said 'will be for ours to be the first generation to end child poverty forever... It is a twenty year mission, but I believe it can be done.'

It was a massive task.

Child poverty had increased threefold in the previous two decades and the UK had the highest rate of child poverty in the European Union.

The government pledged that child poverty would be reduced by a quarter by 2004/5, halved by 2010 and eradicated by 2020.

A plethora of initiatives were developed that followed the mantra – work for those who can and security for those who can't.

Welfare to work programmes like New Deal aimed to encourage entry and return into paid work. Jobcentre Plus was developed to better assist the unemployed with their job search.

There was a record rise in child benefits. Sure Start was introduced to develop the physical, intellectual and social development of the young. Then there were the regeneration programmes.

All of this has given the government some confidence that it will hit its first target – reducing child poverty by 25 per cent.

And the benefits are starting to surface. Lone parent Sharon Grieg is featured in this report and she praises the support she received from the Sure Start scheme in South London.

Mother of four Tracey Goode has emerged as a winner. She is now one of the community go-getters in an outpost of a government regeneration programme on the south coast.

But achieving the first milestone was always going to be the easier part.

If government is going to end child poverty then the gap between the rich and poor that rose so dramatically between the

late 1970s and the early 1990s must be narrowed.

It means a fairer distribution of wealth. It means this and future governments winning public hearts and minds by convincing the nation that everyone has much to gain from tackling child poverty – not just the Bradshaw family and others like them.

Alan Bradshaw is living with two sons on less than £200 per week – 3.8 million children are in families surviving on similar amounts. Alan has no oven and he dare not take his children to the local shopping centre. It's a modern form of torture – look but don't even think you can buy.

Or there is Julie Kemp. Ask Julie where to get the best deal on bread, milk or potatoes and she can tell you. Shopping around is the only way her family survives. What she calls treats are yoghurts for the kids, and the odd pair of new shoes.

Poverty in Britain today means the stigma children face going to school wearing second-hand clothes, missing out on school trips and struggling because they have no computer for homework projects.

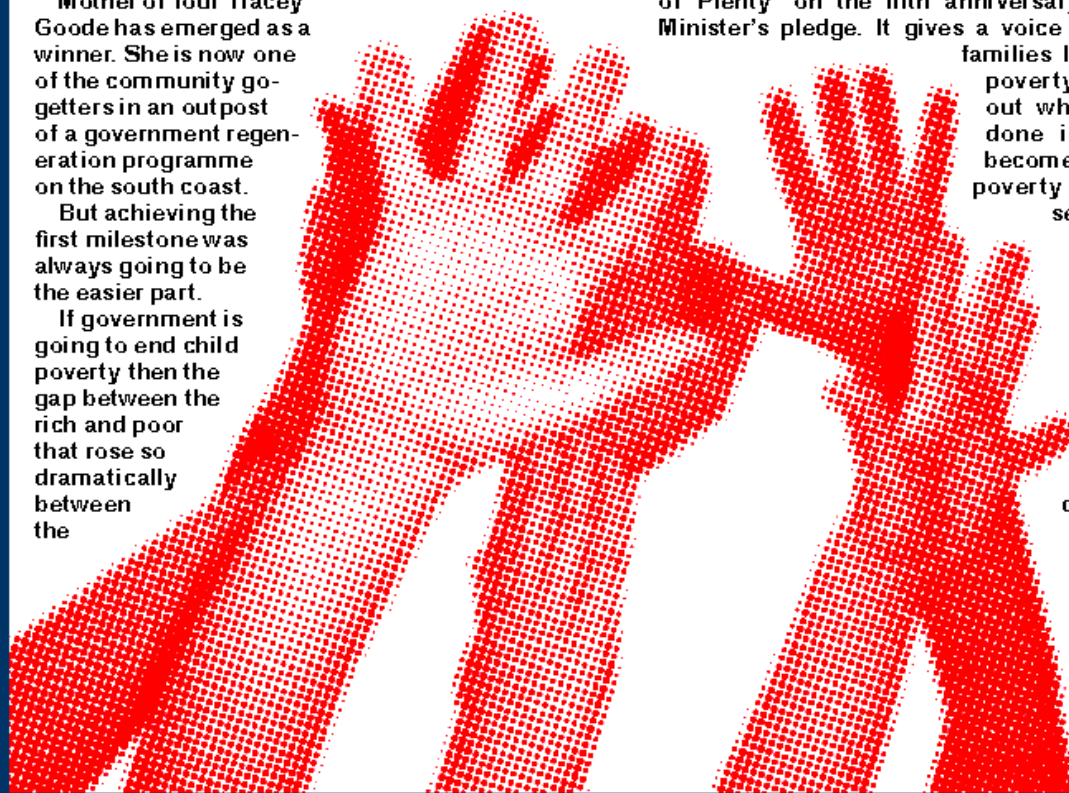
And then there are the support services. Alan Bradshaw's family most benefits from a local voluntary sector befriending scheme that constantly faces a financial crisis. Sharon Grieg's received brilliant support from Sure Start but when she moved down the road out of the catchment area the support ended.

Talk to the families who are on the poverty line. You will soon find what services work and why they need more, more of the best.

End Child Poverty is publishing 'Poverty in a Land of Plenty' on the fifth anniversary of the Prime Minister's pledge. It gives a voice to some of the

families living below the poverty line. It maps out what needs to be done if Britain is to become a nation where poverty is not a life sentence.

Tony Blair already has a good idea what that is. 'Our goal' he said in September 2002, 'must be a Britain in which we continue to re-distribute power, wealth and opportunity to the many and not the few.'



## The land of plenty

BRITAIN is an extraordinarily prosperous nation. Our citizens are wealthy, healthy and have a high standard of living, with access to all the trappings of modern life.

An average income in Britain is ten times greater than that of someone living in South Africa, seventy times higher than someone living in Bangladesh<sup>1</sup>. Food is plentiful; indeed millions of tonnes of 'surplus' food are disposed of each year. Access to the latest technology is widespread; three quarters of adults own a mobile phone and two-thirds of households with children have access to the internet<sup>2</sup>. As incomes have risen in the last thirty years, people in Britain have been able to reduce the proportion of their income they spend on necessities such as food and have nearly doubled what they spend on leisure<sup>3</sup>.

We live in a land of plenty, where the living standards are high and where opportunities abound. Yet Britain is a wealthy nation that hides terrible poverty; poverty that has been well within our means to

avoid. While we have lapped up luxuries and abundant opportunities, we have allowed a sizeable group of our population to experience a standard of living most of us would regard as woefully unacceptable.

We have especially failed a generation of children. 3.8 million children are living in poverty in modern Britain. Over 100,000 chil-

**3.8 MILLION CHILDREN ARE LIVING IN POVERTY IN MODERN BRITAIN. OVER 100,000 CHILDREN DO NOT HAVE A PERMANENT HOME AND MILLIONS ARE GOING WITHOUT BASIC NECESSITIES, SUCH AS ADEQUATE CLOTHING OR A HEALTHY DIET**

dren do not have a permanent home<sup>4</sup> and millions go without basic necessities, such as adequate clothing or a healthy diet<sup>5</sup>. Hundreds and thousands of children are experiencing the kind of poverty most people assume no longer exists in Britain: having to go without such basic needs as properly fitted shoes, a warm, waterproof coat and daily fresh fruit and vegetables<sup>6</sup>.

Having ignored poverty for decades, the scale of the problem we

now face is so huge that it will take nothing short of an entire reassessment of our country's priorities to address it. This is no small challenge. If all Britain's poor children were to link arms they would stretch from London to Glasgow and back again. A generation of children stretching nearly 800 miles<sup>7</sup>. We can't magic poverty away for these children; we have to act.

But change is well within our grasp. There is nothing inevitable about the state we have got ourselves in. The sharp increases in poverty that were seen in the UK between the late 1970s and early 1990s were not mirrored in many other countries. Other rich, developed nations have followed a path that has not led to such high levels of poverty. A child in the UK is twice as likely to experience poverty as a Swedish child, nearly five times more likely to be poor as a Danish child<sup>8</sup>. There is nothing less worthy about our country's children; high levels of child poverty in Britain are entirely of our own making. And it is well within our means to reverse these trends.

The government has made a commitment to eradicate child poverty but public support for this

## JULIE KEMP

**JULIE KEMP KNOWS HER SUPER-MARKETS. She can reel off the price of any product you care to ask her in any store within a fifteen mile radius of the family home.**

Julie's ability to juggle her money is extraordinary. 'One week out of the month I normally have a little bit of money that I can go out and treat the family with. It's usually about £20, if that'. But Julie's treat would be anybody else's necessity. 'The months coming up now - Gemma needs new school shoes and Leetoo. Then in a couple of month's time it will probably be Martin and Jessica that need new things.'

Julie is a single mum with four children - Lee, (14), Gemma, (12), Martin, (6) and Jessica, (4).

The family, originally from Southend, moved to East Anglia, having split from the two eldest children's father. However, the rural idyll was disrupted when she broke up with her partner - she was pregnant with Jessica at the time.

Three years ago, and after years on the council waiting list, Julie and the children moved into a newly built housing association home.

It's the support from her parents that has helped Julie to get through the last few years. 'If it wasn't for my mum and dad we would have hardly anything in this house.'

Two years ago Julie's parents stepped in and bought her a car. 'Jessica has a serious hip problem and there have been times when we've had to visit the hospital three times a week - to get there without a car we'd have to get a bus into King's Lynn and then a bus from there out to the hospital'. Julie's dad pays for her car insurance and

she buys stamps each week to cover the cost of her car tax.

When her older children started school, Julie went back to work as an upholsterer but left when she became pregnant with Martin. She's eager to get back to work but knows that it would be impossible to do so until Jessica's hip problems are resolved. For now the family survive on just over £200 a week, the bulk of which is made up from Income Support and Child Benefit. Julie has applied for Disability Living Allowance for Jessica on a number of occasions but she's always been turned down on the grounds that Jessica is pending an operation.

Julie works hard to cope with the cost of Christmas - over the year she pays the milkman £4 a week for a hamper, which contains all the food she needs apart from the turkey.

'I start my Christmas shopping in the January sales so most of their Christmas presents have already been bought and hidden away. Kate, my neighbour, has a jar indoors for me and I try and put a couple of quid a week in that. As it's not in the house, I can't dip into it. Money for birthday and Christmas presents all comes out of the jar. If I didn't plan it this way then I don't know what I'd do.'

The children have never had a holiday and Julie worries that they miss out on many of the things their friends take for granted: 'they never have their clothes new, all their clothes come from charity shops apart from those that my mum buys them'.

Despite the difficulties, Julie enjoys being a parent - 'sometimes, when things are really tough and I'm feeling down all I have to do is look at the kids' faces. That's what makes it all worthwhile' ♦

**"They never have their clothes new...they come from charity shops apart from those my mum buys"**



**"Kate my neighbour, has a jar indoors for me and I try to put a couple of quid a week in that... money for birthdays and Christmas all comes out of the jar"**

pledge has been not been tested. The government has pursued its anti-poverty strategy by stealth and has given the impression that we can tackle poverty by willing it away. The public remains silent on poverty and unaware of its devastating impact on our society.

In Britain we hear many reports of the problems we face, but they are often problems of over-consumption: the impact of overindulgence on our environment, our waistlines and our pockets. We don't think of ourselves as a nation that is wanting. But we are failing to provide an adequate standard of living for millions of children and in a country as prosperous as ours we have no excuses. We can, and must, do better.

## Why it would benefit us all to act

**OUR FAILURE to prevent the rise in child poverty in Britain – a three-fold increase in the past thirty years – has left us with a devastating legacy.**

This is no more evident than in the relatively high numbers of

children whose lives are lost each year. A baby born into poverty is more than twice as likely to die in the first year as a child born to better-off parents<sup>9</sup> and as many as 1,400 young lives would be saved each year if poverty were eradicated<sup>10</sup>.

Poverty has the most profound impact on children's life chances. A boy living in Manchester can

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expect to live seven years less than a boy living in more salubrious Barnet<sup>11</sup>. There is a measurable difference in birth weight among babies born into low income families. Despite improvements in our living standards over the past thirty years, the gap in life expectancy between rich and poor has remained as wide as it was in the 1970s.

Living in poverty can be dangerous. Poor children are fifteen times

more likely to die in a house fire than better-off children<sup>12</sup> and three times more likely to be hit by a car<sup>13</sup>. The kinds of protection offered to better-off children – safe places to play, a secure home environment – are denied children living in poverty.

But the risks associated with poverty do not only relate to health and safety; poverty also has an impact on a child's ability to learn. Before reaching his or her second birthday, a child from a poorer family is already more likely to show a lower level of attainment than a child from a better-off family. By the age of six a less able child from a rich family is likely to have overtaken an able child born into a poor family<sup>14</sup>. Given all we know about the importance of the home environment in supporting children's learning, it comes as no surprise that children living in deprived circumstances fail to keep up with their better-off peers. The tragedy is that such inequalities have a profound impact on an individual's later life.

Growing up in poverty leaves a lasting scar. While no child's destiny is set in stone, children who grow up in poor households are

## TRACEY GOODE

**TRACEY GOODE IS THE SORT OF PERSON to warm home secretary David Blunkett's heart. The bit of his heart, that is, that is desperate to see more people get actively involved in their communities.**

Tracey lives on the Moulsecomb estate in Brighton – not the most salubrious area in town.

Tracey has four children Brandon (11) Bradley (10) Samara (8) Salula (5) and has lived on her own for the last seven years.

Because her youngest Salula is disabled Tracey gets a care allowance and disability allowance.

Tracey has no complaints about the amount she gets. 'I want to give something back.' She says and she is. Tracey is throwing herself wholeheartedly into the Moulsecomb community. She organises cookery classes with some of the mums in the area, helps run health activities during the week and seems to be on a plethora of groups.

She organises holidays for kids and is on the health steering group of East Brighton For You – one of the outposts of the government's New Deal regeneration programmes.

But she does not plan to be relying on benefits for the rest of her life. 'I know that when the children get older, the amount I can get will go down. And I will be getting older facing retirement without a pension.'

And she knows that her drive to get involved in the community will benefit her and her kids. She wants her kids to have aspirations.

'One of the teachers recently asked what the children wanted to do when they grew

up. One said, "Go down to the post office and collect the cheque every week like my mum does". Well I want my children to do more than that.'

Her game plan is to get paid for doing community or social work. 'In ten years I want to get paid – rather than live on benefits. And I want to get paid for the sort of work that I am doing now as a volunteer.'

Tracey does not really have an answer as to why she had got involved and others around haven't.

**She knows that her drive to get involved in the community will benefit her and her kids**

It could simply be down to personality. She used to be a bingo caller. After you have shouted numbers in front of a 1,000 people waiting to make their fortune, getting involved in committees and pulling some mums on the estate out of their shells' may not be so daunting.

But Tracey illustrates the very conundrum that the government faces if it is going to provide services to people that people want and need.

Most of the groups that Tracey is involved in are organised around the council run family centre on the estate. Yet she knows that puts some people off.

'The Family Centre and the people in it are great but some people on the estate do not join us because they know its social services.'

Even Tracey would never have got involved in the centre if she had known.

'The first time I walked through the front doors it was because my car had broken down and I needed some water. Once I was through the doors I realised what a great place it was and what it had to offer. If that had not happened I would not have gone into the centre either' ♦



**"In ten years I want to get paid – rather than live on benefits. And I want to get paid for the sort of work that I am doing now as a volunteer"**

more likely to leave school at 16, have poor health, come into early contact with the police, be unemployed as young adults, have low expectations for the future and end up earning a relatively low wage<sup>45</sup>.

The roots of many of the social problems that our society faces lie in childhood poverty. It is not only morally wrong that we have turned our back on a generation of children, it is also costing our society heavily. The eradication of child poverty in Britain would have a profound impact, not only on the lives of an entire generation, but on the rest of society.

## Where have we gone wrong?

POVERTY HAS many causes, as our case studies show. But the rise in poverty over the last thirty years has been so dramatic that its causes can not be explained away as examples of personal misfortune.

There have been major changes to our society which have allowed a significant proportion of our population to fall behind the rest, in

terms of income, opportunities and living standards.

The gap between the rich and poor rose dramatically between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. During that period the gap between the earnings of the highest and lowest paid widened. This was partly due to higher rewards for skills and qualifications but also due to a

## THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR ROSE DRAMATICALLY BETWEEN THE LATE 1970s AND THE EARLY 1990s. DURING THAT PERIOD THE GAP BETWEEN THE EARNINGS OF THE HIGHEST AND LOWEST PAID WIDENED

decline in wage protection.

Poverty levels also rose because of changes in working patterns during the 1980s. The number of households with no one in work increased and the concentration of unemployment among families with children led to a significant increase in child poverty.

Poverty has also become increasingly linked to a lack of access to wealth. The contribution that assets, such as savings and investment in property, make to inequali-

ty in our society has increased almost fourfold since the 1970s. Yet a large number of families — one in four — have no savings whatsoever<sup>46</sup>.

These global trends had a major impact on the lives of thousands of children. But during the 1980s and 1990s there was also a failure on the part of the State to protect families from poverty. Benefit levels were inadequate and, because they did not rise in line with earnings, were allowed to fall further behind general living standards. In other countries social security payments were sufficient to protect citizens against global trends. In Sweden, for example, two thirds of families are lifted out of poverty because of state benefits, whereas in the UK only a third of families escape poverty because of financial support from the state<sup>47</sup>.

## The awakening?

FIVE YEARS ago the scourge of poverty and inequality barely registered on policy makers' agendas.

But since 1999 the government's priorities have changed and the challenge of ending child poverty

## CAROLINE THOMAS



*"As a child, my family was always poor and I don't want him to go without and feel like I felt"*

**CAROLINE THOMAS LIVES WITH HER PARTNER MARK and son, Christopher in a council house in Gillingham. Christopher is nine and needs constant attention — he suffers from Global Developmental Delay and Attention Defect Hyperactivity Disorder.**

The sleeping difficulties he's always had have recently worsened and Christopher barely sleeps for three hours a night. Caroline and Mark take turns to stay up with him.

"We'd like to go back to work but you can't survive on three hours' sleep" Caroline points out. She used to work as a street cleaner and would love to return to work part-time 'perhaps as a school midday assistant, it would help out with the money'.

Last year Caroline and Mark decided to develop some new skills which could lead to work that fits around Christopher's needs — they started a floristry course at Rochester College. However, they were forced to abandon their studies for lack of funds. "We got a small grant but it didn't cover the real costs — we were spending £10 a week on flowers so we had to share. Mark would do the practical, unpick his display and then I would do mine. We stuck with it for as long as we could but had to give up because we just couldn't afford it."

For now the couple rely on benefits. Neither are strangers to poverty, having been brought up in poor families but caring for Christopher adds to the strain. Parents of disabled children face on average three times the costs of parents of non-disabled children. "Christopher goes through clothes quicker than other children. We got him a new pair of school shoes last week — he'd

only had his last pair three months but he'd worn out the fronts."

Caroline's first attempt to claim Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for her son ended in failure and, suffering from depression, she was inclined to give up. But the local welfare benefits office 'were brilliant' and helped her re-apply. One year after first applying, the family was successful, which means we can afford to buy him treats every so often.

Caroline is evangelical about the support she's received from the Family Welfare Association's local service. "You can talk to

**"It's hard to try and make ends meet but you'd do anything for your child and you'd go without for your child"**

them and you don't feel threatened. They break down the barriers that social services can create."

Over the years Caroline's taken part in parenting and self-esteem classes, gone on outings during the school holidays, and Christopher attends the after-school club two evenings a week. So when the service was threatened with closure, it made sense that Caroline led the campaign to keep it open.

"I got everybody involved — the families who used the service, the local radio and television station and our MP."

Caroline gets into debt to try and give Christopher some of the treats she never had as a kid. She takes out two loans a year to pay for Christmas and Christopher's birthday. She's resolute about giving him decent presents even though the loans take a whole year to pay off. "As a child, my family was always poor and I don't want him to go without and feel like I felt."

Caroline is determined to break the cycle of poverty that has afflicted generations of her family. "It's hard to try and make ends meet but you'd do anything for your child and you'd go without for your child" ♦

has been brought into focus in an unprecedented way.

The Prime Minister's pledge to end child poverty, made during a speech on 18 March 1999, marked a significant shift in government thinking. This was no small step. In his speech Tony Blair set out his long-term mission. He said: "Our historic aim, that ours is the first generation to end child poverty forever...It's a 20 year mission but I believe it can be done"<sup>21</sup>.

Quashing fears that this was a vague commitment, the Prime Minister's pledge was subsequently bolstered by a series of specific targets set at intervals to measure the government's intended progress towards the ultimate eradication of child poverty. There is little doubt of the government's strong commitment to reverse the damaging trends of a generation.

Since 1999 the government has introduced improvements to benefits, a national minimum wage, new tax credits and new services aimed at supporting poor children, such as Sure Start. Such measures have contributed towards slowing down the otherwise widening gap between rich and poor. In just three years, having had the highest child

poverty rate in Europe, the UK moved up the European child welfare league by five places<sup>22</sup>.

But despite the sincerity of the government's efforts and the investment of substantial resources to reduce child poverty, the gargantuan scale of the task ahead remains. The action that government has taken in the past five years

**RATHER THAN RELYING ON SPORADIC INITIATIVES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE MOST DISADVANTAGED, OUR HEALTH, EDUCATION, HOUSING AND TRANSPORT SERVICES OUGHT TO PLAY A GREATER ROLE IN COMPENSATING FOR THE DISADVANTAGES FACED BY CHILDREN GROWING UP IN POVERTY**

has helped some children out of poverty. But it has stalled, rather than reversed, the trends of the past thirty years. And as a consequence a generation of children are still left behind, their life chances heavily stacked against them.

Today an average household spends around £400 a week<sup>23</sup>. But

3.8 million children are living in families relying on less than half this amount<sup>24</sup>. Many of these children are going without basic needs. And some services are simply beyond the reach of poor families. A typical nursery place, for example, costs £134 a week<sup>25</sup>. For those families left behind, the daily struggle to live on a low income is costing lives, diminishing hope and constraining opportunities.

## What's the solution?

AS OUR CASE studies show, the steps out of poverty are relatively simple: families need access to supportive local services, employment opportunities that are flexible to fit with family life and an income adequate to meet the demands of modern living.

We know what works. Where supportive local services and employment opportunities exist, alongside the improvements in benefit and tax credit income, the government has been able to make an impact on child poverty. Initiatives such as Sure Start and the New Deal are helping families. In some areas substantial improvements have

## ALAN BRADSHAW

**ALAN BRADSHAW IS THE LITMUS TEST of the government's policy to end child poverty. He has two children – Graham (7) and Callum (3) and lives in a two-bed council house on the south coast. Alan has been in hospital, Graham is small for his age – possibly due to the illness that caused his mother's early death in 1990, and Callum is not having the easiest time at school.**

*"Whenever you see celebs and politicians on TV living on benefits they never show the real picture. It's not just for a week, it's for months and years"*



Most of this springs from poverty. The family are living on around £150 per week and Alan feels they have been more failed than supported by the state.

Until he ended up caring for his wife Jane in 1999, Alan was working as a gardener and tree surgeon. His job took him away from home and he admits that he was not the most present of fathers. When he stopped working the family's

income plummeted.

Poverty is not just about money, it is about emotions, relationships, self-esteem and everything else that that comes under stress when you are surviving from day to day.

When his wife died Alan had to prove to social services that he was capable of looking after his children. His experience has not left a warm feeling about official support networks – they are to be avoided at all costs.

But social services put Alan in contact with a voluntary and community sector group that arranges volunteer befrienders to provide support for families.

Graham and Callum have had their own separate befrienders for the last three years and Alan thinks it's a service that has helped keep everything together.

Callum was having a hard time at school and there was tension between him and Graham. Alan was finding it difficult to deal with.

"The befrienders are so different from social services. We are all in the driving seat and it goes along at our speed. It's been great for the two boys and has really given me support."

Callum talks to his befriender about issues that he may not talk to his dad about but Alan says he does not feel threatened. "I have seen what it has done for him. He is really happier in himself. He can see an other side of life, see how others live and that is really positive for him. His befriender has just got a new job where she flies around the world. It is great that he can see that and know what can be out there."

The same is true for Graham. "I can't really afford to take the kids out, so even

the simple things, like going on a train with his befriender, gives Graham a thrill. I avoid going to the shopping centre with the kids because for me and them it's look but don't buy. But Graham's befriender goes with him and he just wants to go up and down the escalators."

Juggling with so little money makes school trips and clothes a real challenge. "Whenever you see these celebs and politicians on TV living on benefits they never show the real picture. It's not just for a week, it's for months and years. I try to save little amounts every week to pay for the big costs that come up."

But that still means, because Alan wants to avoid debt at all costs, that he will not borrow money, even from the Social Fund. That means no cash to replace the broken oven. Social services tested his cooking abilities but the family now does not have an oven! This level of poverty means that things that are no longer luxuries – like computers – are just a distant dream.

To make ends meet Alan has sold the truck he used for his gardening work. He knows that that will not help when it comes to getting back to work. But he is still optimistic. When he feels that Graham can deal with it, he will find some way to build up some jobs. In the meantime he uses his gardening skills growing vegetables in his allotment.

Alan survives on his guile, his love for his kids and two befrienders from an organisation that is struggling to survive. As for the future, that's simple "I want to live long enough to see my children grow up" ♦

*The names of this family have been changed*

**Alan survives on his guile, his love for his kids and two befrienders from an organisation that is struggling to survive**

been made.

But so far the level of support for families living in poverty is a drop in the ocean. Greatest support has been targeted to the 20% most disadvantaged areas but only half of all children in poverty live here. Sure Start services are reaching only one in three of all children living in poverty. Eradicating child poverty rests on extending the services that are working well in limited areas to the country as a whole.

It also requires a more ambitious approach towards tackling poverty throughout public services. Rather than relying on sporadic initiatives to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged, our health, education, housing and transport services ought to play a greater role in compensating for the disadvantages faced by children growing up in poverty.

Where steps have been taken to tackle educational underachievement in some disadvantaged areas, for example, the results have been impressive. But the thrust of education policy favours the better-off; reducing educational inequalities has yet to become part of the main agenda; this would require a major re-orientation of the existing sys-

tem. There needs to be a concerted, strategic effort, led by government, across all public services to maximise efforts towards reducing child poverty.

A joined-up assault on poverty is more necessary than ever since the poorest families are least likely to have escaped poverty in recent years. The government's initiatives

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SO ERADICATING IT IS NOT AN  
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have benefited those living just beneath the breadline most. The poverty gap — the total amount of income by which all families fall short of the poverty line — has actually increased in recent years<sup>29</sup>.

While services are crucial, poverty in Britain always comes down to a question of money. Protecting family incomes is critical. Measures to improve the level of low earnings and reduce unfair inequalities in rewards for work are vital.

Ensuring that taxation is fair, shifting from indirect to direct taxation to ensure that the tax system is redistributive, is needed. Increasing benefit and tax credit levels will be necessary. Despite improvements, income support levels are still below the poverty line and many families are living on even lower levels of income; one in three claimants have money deducted from their benefits<sup>24</sup>.

For the vast majority of families in poverty there is no protection from the significant costs that all parents face from time to time: the need to purchase a child's new coat or pair of shoes, the need to replace a broken cooker or fix the heating. Living on a low income is often costly; families can not afford to spread their costs or take out loans and are unlikely to be able to access direct debit or be eligible for more favourable bank charges.

Basic levels of support are inadequate to enable families with children to participate fully in society. When you are scared to take your children out to visit the local shopping centre, simply because you know that there is nothing left to spend after you have paid the basic bills, you and your children are

## SHARON GREIG

**MOTHER OF THREE, Sharon Greig, has glowing praise for the government's £500 million Sure Start programme designed to help young children and their parents in deprived areas.**

Support from Sure Start helped Sharon find a full time nursery place for her youngest, Ryan (6). It was Sure Start which supported Sharon and helped her deal with her bouts of depression. It was Sure Start that helped Sharon when Louise (13) had difficulties at school. It was Sure Start that encouraged Sharon to deal with their overcrowded West Croydon flat. The children literally lived — or at least slept — on top of each other. Sure Start helped Sharon fill in the forms and move to the less crowded new three-bed housing association house in South Croydon beside the Brighton main line.

But Sure Start is no longer providing that support. The family's move means that Sharon and her family are no longer in the right postcode for the Sure Start scheme.

'I really miss the support that Sure Start gave me. They really helped me and I now feel on my own.'

Also on Sharon's Sure Start support list was help to get a Social Fund loan of £397 for new furniture and furnishings when the family moved. Sharon is doggedly paying off the £27.97 per week which knocks a hole in the £148 she gets in income support.

Juggling with money is a full time occupation. Emma (16) has got a place at college to do a hairdressing course. But Emma and Sharon are still trying to work out how they are going to pay for Emma's equipment and travel to the work placement.

You wonder how much of Sharon's waking hours are spent worrying about

money. If it's not paying off the Social Fund, or finding money for Emma's college, it is replacing school uniforms, or trying — sometimes unsuccessfully — to pay for school trips.

The family is lucky that Croydon still gives uniform grants of up to £25 for junior school and £45 for secondary school children.

'But the council only gives the grants every 18 months,' says Sharon. 'By that time Ryan has outgrown or outworn at least five sets of trousers. So I am constantly on the tour of Salvation Army shops to find replacements.'

Emma recently missed out on a £200 school trip. 'I had to tell her I could not afford it and there was just no money available. That makes me feel bad.'

Then there is the phone. You get hold of Sharon on her pay-as-you-go mobile. It's expensive but it does mean that Sharon only buys the phonecards when she has the cash. The landline has long since been cut off and that has a knock-on effect on Emma's schoolwork.

Sitting in the corner of the lounge is an old computer that Sharon was given. But no phone line means no web, and no web means that Emma has to try and stay over at school to use computers for homework. 'I try and use the school computers when I can but my friends can do work in their own time, in their own homes.'

Emma and Louise's grandparents live in Norwich and all the kids can go up there in the holidays and the grandparents' pay for it.

'But you know, we have never ever been on holiday by ourselves. If we could go, how good that would feel? A family holiday just once a year!'

**"I miss the support Sure Start gave me. They really helped me and now I feel on my own"**



**"We have never, ever been on holiday by ourselves. If we could go, how good that would feel? A family holiday just once a year!"**

being denied the chance to participate in the kind of everyday activity most of us take for granted.

In today's Britain, children need more than clothes, food and shelter to lead a full and active life. Basic needs that are required to participate in modern life are strikingly different to even a decade ago. Most children, for example, now have access to computers to help them with their schoolwork. But such purchases are beyond the means of families living in poverty; their children are already starting learning at a disadvantage.

Ending child poverty will require benefits, tax credits and the minimum wage to be up rated in line with income growth, not just inflation, to ensure that the living standards of the poorest in society do not continue to progress at a far slower pace than the better off.

These are not greedy goals. In a country as wealthy as our own, it is shameful that we are unable to provide even the basics for all children.

In the end it all comes down to money. It would cost around £8.8 billion pounds to close the income gap sufficiently to eradicate child poverty in Britain<sup>26</sup>. This is equivalent to the amount currently spent

each year on the annual budget of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. It is only one-tenth of what we spend each year on the NHS and one-sixth of what is spent on defence<sup>26</sup>.

So eradicating child poverty is not an unaffordable goal. It is a matter of priorities. But you can not end child poverty by hoping it will

**THE ERADICATION OF CHILD POVERTY, A TWENTY YEAR MISSION, IS NOT THE PRESERVE OF ANY POLITICAL PARTY. IT REQUIRES A CROSS-PARTY COMMITMENT TO ADDRESS ONE OF THE MOST DAMAGING PROBLEMS WE FACE AS A SOCIETY**

go away. It requires a commitment from Britain's citizens to take action — a collective determination to make our society a better place. There is apathy to embrace change. The electorate needs to be convinced of the importance of ending child poverty and of the government's ability to achieve change. We need a more open debate about the impact of poverty on individuals and wider society, and the steps we can take together to eradicate it.

It also requires a more honest debate about taxation and priorities for public spending. Britain remains a relatively low tax country and we might ask ourselves whether this has contributed to the polarisation in our society in recent decades.

As the next General Election looms into sight, these are the issues that need to be aired, that all political parties must engage with. The eradication of child poverty, a twenty year mission, is not the preserve of any political party. It requires a cross-party commitment to address one of the most damaging problems we face as a society.

No government can eradicate child poverty by stealth. Politicians must lead a debate about how we want our society to be and what means are necessary to achieve this. They have a responsibility to engage citizens in one of the most important decisions we have to make as a nation ●

**ANDRE & ALEXIS MAIZE**

**THINGS ARE STARTING TO LOOK UP for Andre and Alexis Maize and their young family. After being out of work for most of 2003, Andre recently started a new job in a call centre near Canary Wharf. He's glad to be working again despite the long hours and that his family will only be 'a few pounds a week' better off than on benefits.**

The couple moved to Britain from Monserrat after repeated volcanic eruptions and lava flows made large areas of the Island too dangerous to live on. Alexis arrived in 1997 and Andre, who had been working as a police officer since he left school, was the last member of his large family to leave, when he followed Alexis in 1998.

The couple have four young children, Lemuel (4), Lexuel (3), Lonuel (2) and Precious (1) and now Andre is back in work. Alexis spends her days caring for the children in their tiny one bedroom council flat.

Unsurprisingly, it's the family's living arrangements that 'make life a real struggle'. Andre acknowledges that 'life would be a lot easier if we had a bigger place'. The six family members all sleep in the same small bedroom and now he has to leave early for work, Andre worries about waking the children.

He'd also like a garden for them to play in — the first floor flat leads out on to a concrete staircase.

There's a place for everything in the small square living room and the children's toys are stacked tidily in the corner.

Although the couple admit, 'We're always packing and unpacking toys.'

When the weather's good the family visit local parks. They regularly take part in

activities organised by the local Sure Start scheme and the Family Welfare Association's Families at Canning Town project, which also provides information and advice.

The three younger children visit Sure Start's toddler gym in Becliton on Mondays and Fridays, and this provides them with the space to play that they don't have at home. Alexis's only complaint about the scheme is that activities are spread around the local area. As the family rely on public transport, she would find it easier if everything were in one place.

Andre's happy to be working again but struggled with the expenses associated with returning to work — 'I needed to buy suitable clothes and pay for my first month's travel upfront'. He applied for a loan from the Social Fund but was refused. Unprepared to borrow from banks or his family, it was another case of 'just struggling through, there was no other way so I just had to forget about it'.

Things would almost certainly be different were the couple's relatives not living nearby. They consider themselves blessed in that they 'couldn't have got through the last few years without God's and our family's help'.

As for the future, Andre would like to become a teacher. 'I'd like to go in as a teaching assistant with the opportunity to learn in the classroom, that way I could earn at the same time. I like being a round children and supporting them and helping them in any way. If it turned up today I'd jump at it'.

'The family I come from believes that to succeed in life you need to think positively and work towards it. I'm working towards getting a better future and it will work out' ♦

**"We couldn't have got through the last few years without God's and our family's help"**



**"Life would be a lot easier if we had a bigger place" — the parents and four children all sleep in the same small bedroom**

# POVERTY IN A LAND OF PLENTY

## Footnotes

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## Acknowledgements

End Child Poverty would like to thank

all the families whose contributions were so vital to the production of this report.

We are also grateful to Helen Stone for photographs of the families and Peter Brawne who designed this publication. Thanks also to Eileen Ware, Helen Dent and colleagues at the Family Welfare Association, Anne McClaren at Fun in Action for Children and Catherine Howarth at TELCO.

## Colophon

Poverty in a Land of Plenty: Five Years On  
First published by End Child Poverty, March 2004  
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Printed by Hieroglyphics Design & Communications

## END CHILD POVERTY once and for all

**End Child Poverty is a broad coalition of organisations and individuals committed to ending the scandal of child poverty in the UK. We work to keep government to its pledge to eradicate child poverty by 2020, to inform the public about the causes and effects of child poverty and to ensure that families living on low incomes have a voice in the poverty debate.**

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