



What makes an anti-poverty strategy effective?

Executive summary

This briefing develops a framework to assess what makes an anti-poverty strategy effective. It aims to inform thinking about if and how an anti-poverty strategy could be used to tackle poverty in Wales. Its focus is on the strategy itself and *how* it can add value in addition to the anti-poverty actions and initiatives that sit beneath it. A companion study focuses on assessing the impact of particular poverty-reduction policies and programmes themselves, seeking to explore *what* should be delivered to address contemporary poverty and social exclusion in Wales.

The briefing is based on research into five current international anti-poverty strategies. Based on these cases, the role of an anti-poverty strategy is to bring about action on poverty within a context in which those who want action are not always the same people and organisations as those who can take action.

Drawing additionally on other research into what constitutes a good strategy, we propose that a well-designed anti-poverty strategy should:

1. Provide a framework which provides a means by which to enable or oblige action.
2. Be clear what it aims to achieve and only include actions which serve that end.
3. Recognise that until an anti-poverty initiative has had time to settle in, its planning and implementation are what matter most.
4. Recognise that effective planning and implementation require good understanding, co-ordination and resources.
5. Recognise that making something happen has value in its own right.
6. Be capable of learning as it proceeds, with outcome measures playing an increasing role.
7. Be the responsibility of a minister with enough seniority to ensure that the strategy is put into effect.

The briefing also summarises the role of those with lived experience of poverty in the five strategies.

An effective anti-poverty strategy must be ‘for real’, leading to action not just aspiration

The case studies

The research base for this study are five anti-poverty or poverty reduction strategies. Of the five, two are regional strategies (the state of Baden-Württemberg in south-west Germany and the region of Castilla La Mancha in central Spain), two are national strategies (Scotland and New Zealand) and one is a city strategy (Toronto in Canada).

Their selection depended on the similarity of the territory and its government to Wales, that they were ‘live’ at the point of the research, and the availability of documentation and an expert who had some detailed knowledge of the strategy.

The review

A set of ten questions was developed to assess each of the case studies:

Category	Question
Context and origins of the strategy	Who initiated it, why, and what went before?
	How does the strategy itself add value, e.g., by introducing something new, prioritising something already being done, by improving co-ordination?
Scope and design of the strategy	What is the goal of the strategy and what sorts of outcomes does it aim for (e.g. poverty reduction; supporting people who are poor or excluded)?
	What topics does it include and why were they chosen (e.g. for their importance, or because they fit the goal)?
	How does being in the strategy help prioritise an item/programme?
Putting the strategy into action	Is there a special budget for programmes included in the strategy?
	Whose actions are included? How is compliance with the plan by bodies outside government (e.g. local government, charities, companies) achieved?
Targets and monitoring	Is there an action plan and who within government is responsible for it?
	Are there measurable targets and a process for monitoring and evaluation? What external involvement is there in this?
	To whom are official monitoring or evaluation reports presented – and what then happens?

An effective anti-poverty strategy must have a palpable tension between the drive for action and the insistence that action be done well

Characteristics of a good strategy

Literature on what makes for a good strategy highlights the following characteristics of a 'good' strategy: **high-level commitment, accountability, involvement and communication, prioritisation, understanding and monitoring.**

This list of characteristics was then reviewed in light of what the five case study strategies studied in this briefing suggest about these conditions in practice. The findings are listed below, and apply to three of the five characteristics:

- **Commitment:** For any strategy involving more than one ministry, either the Mayor or Prime Minister themselves, or another high-level minister, must be responsible. It is also clear that the Finance Minister must be committed.
- **Prioritisation:** A strategy in which everything is a priority must be coherent – actions must be linked to clearly defined objectives and different objectives must have some unity between them – and compact.
- **Understanding and monitoring:** Planned outcome monitoring is important, but it is only after enough time has passed for evidence of its impact to emerge that it becomes so. Until then what matters is making sure that strategy actions are well-designed, capable of meeting the objectives set for them if all goes as expected, and well-implemented.

The role of the anti-poverty strategy itself

The list of features that characterise a good anti-poverty strategy leaves a central question unanswered: what does the anti-poverty strategy itself do, as distinct from the actions and initiatives that make it up? Without an answer to that, we cannot judge whether it is effective.

One role an anti-poverty strategy plays seems obvious: it is a statement of values and a signal of intent. In most if not all case studies, the strategy emerged as a response to poverty becoming party-political, around, or in the run-up to elections. Yet any government policy can be used to send a signal about values if desired. Signalling is not therefore a role that is special to a strategy or which defines it.

The strategies studied here show that there is something else. What they show, in a sentence, is that the role of an anti-poverty strategy is to bring about action on poverty within a context in which those who want action are not always the same people and organisations as those who can take action. In some of the case studies, this was true even within government departments or a particular local authority. Poverty was moved up the agenda and those who wanted to take action had a framework within which to do so.

An effective anti-poverty strategy must lead to action that is well planned and well implemented

The characteristics of an effective anti-poverty strategy

We suggest the following checklist of seven characteristics which an anti-poverty strategy needs to have if it is to be effective. This checklist is intended to be of use to those involved in developing an anti-poverty strategy. In order to be effective, such a strategy needs to:

1. Be understood as a framework which provides those who want action taken on poverty with a means by which to enable or oblige those who can take action to do so.
2. Be clear what it aims to achieve and only include actions which serve that end. Other actions against poverty are not a priority and so must be excluded.
3. Recognise that until an anti-poverty initiative has had time to settle in, its planning and implementation are what matter most.
4. Recognise that good planning and implementation require good and detailed understanding, co-ordination and resources.
5. Recognise that making something happen is valuable in its own right and a measure in the first instance of a strategy's effectiveness.
6. Be capable of learning as it proceeds, with outcome measures – the impact on people themselves – playing a growing role in this, as a measure in the last instance of a strategy's worth.
7. Be the responsibility of a minister with enough seniority to ensure that the strategy is put into effect. If action is required by more than one department, the assumption is that this minister is the prime or first minister.

This checklist of seven characteristics could be summarised into three broad-brush questions that could be sufficient to reach a conclusion as to whether an anti-poverty strategy is likely to be effective:

1. **Is the strategy 'for real', for action not just aspiration?** That an anti-poverty strategy might just be 'for show' is an anxiety identified in the evidence on international poverty strategies.
2. **Have the actions it has led to been planned well and implemented well?** This is a concern about strategies in general identified within the literature.

3. **Is there a palpable tension to the strategy, between the drive for action and the insistence that action be done well?**

Without this tension, the source of its energy, an anti-poverty strategy loses force and meaning.

The role of people with lived experience of poverty

Three considerations are provided in thinking about what might constitute an 'effective' involvement of people with lived experience of poverty.

1. **Degree of power-sharing.** People with lived experience can have the opportunity to speak, but to what extent, as plans are developed and decisions made, is this taken into account? In particular, where do the structures that enable involvement, whether direct (such as an advisory group) or indirect (through intermediaries), lead? Are they channels for communication – or dead-ends?

2. **Extent of involvement.** Time is of the essence, both in the sense of when in the process people with lived experience are involved and whether there is enough time to allow involvement to unfold in a constructive way. In particular, is there enough time to allow reflection and dialogue – or is involvement in practice just a one-off chance to express an opinion?

3. **Purpose of involvement.** What sort of information and insight is a government seeking being sought from people with lived experience of poverty? The focus of the involvement for people with direct experience should be around the details of plans and proposals, not because these 'little things' are unimportant but because, as 'the basic concerns of life', they are all-important. People with lived experience are experts and as such, belong among those helping to ensure that anti-poverty actions are well-planned and well-implemented.

Find out more

For the full report see Kenway, P., et al. (2022). *What makes an anti-poverty strategy effective?* Cardiff: Wales Centre for Public Policy.

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