



THE ARCHBISHOP  
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Archbishop Stephen writes in today's [Yorkshire Post](#) on the urgent need to tackle Child Poverty. The article follows in full

How is everybody doing?

This was the question that Elmo, the much-loved Sesame Street character who teaches us everything from our ABCs to the importance of kindness, asked X users. Just checking in, he said.

An astonishing 211 million people have viewed the tweet so far.

Many tens of thousands retweeted, commented and shared.

Life is hard, people responded. They may not have put it in quite so much detail given the character constraints, but many expressed feeling the pain of conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine. We are all still living with the impacts of Covid, many of us still grieving and struggling to regain our self-confidence. We see the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on our bank balances and on our high streets. The climate emergency leaves many with existential fears about the future.

I'm struck that children were not reached directly by Elmo's searching question. Yet without decisive action, the impact of the challenges we face will affect our children the most. Indeed, we can already see some of the damaging impacts. The [Good Childhood Report](#), undertaken every year by the Children's Society, highlighted in November 2023 the alarming number of children who are unhappy with their lives, are anxious about going to school, and lack confidence about the future of the country.

Our children are also bearing the brunt of another crisis in this country: poverty. The sobering findings of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation [report](#) on the state of poverty in the UK in 2024 shows us that 4.2 million children – almost one in three – are living in poverty according to the most recent figures. 43% of children who happen to have two or more siblings are living in poverty. If you are a child in a household headed by someone of Pakistani or Bangladeshi heritage, you are more likely than not to grow up in poverty. One million children are living in destitution, a label which harkens back to the Victorian-era. It means that people are unable to meet their most basic needs to stay warm, fed, clean or dry – in the United Kingdom in 2024.

This is a shocking scandal. And I often see it first hand in some of the communities I visit in the North. These are levels of child poverty that should shame us as a society. Yet almost as worrying as the levels themselves is the seeming lack of attention being paid to them in the corridors of power. Whilst communities step up day-in-day-out, setting up baby banks and warm spaces, we sometimes hear people in power arguing about how to measure poverty, or what people should expect as a minimum standard of living. Put simply, these are not the issues I hear about

from the people I meet in the places I visit, and they do little to move us towards addressing the scourge of poverty in our society.

We see plenty in the priorities of the two main political parties about stimulating economic growth, reducing national debt, along with reducing hospital waiting lists and making our streets safer, all of which – to a greater or lesser extent – will improve the lives of people struggling to make ends meet. But none of this meets to the scale of the challenges we face. Communities are yearning for the tools they need to build lives free from poverty and have a stake in the future. This begins with decent incomes, safe and secure housing, and a safety net which ensures nobody goes without. But it goes beyond this. It is about feeling you belong and that you have a stake in the future. It therefore also means decent schooling, safe public spaces, facilities to enable community action, community centres, libraries and youth centres. Often the local church is the only place left in an estate which is open and where you don't have to pay to enter and where there is someone who can listen to you. It is with this in mind that I am doing what I can to encourage the Church in the North to have greater confidence in what we can offer to the communities we serve. We are calling this Faith in the North, a kind of spiritual levelling up. But we also call upon government and all political parties to see the crushing impact of child poverty across the whole nation and make its eradication a priority. In this election year, there is surely no issue more significant than this.

There used to be political consensus about this on the left and the right. In 2010, shortly before an election every bit as consequential as the one we approach, Labour introduced the Child Poverty Act, and the Conservatives supported it. The differences between parties were about how to tackle child poverty, not whether it was a good idea to do so. This year, as the country gets ready for another defining general election, a much more damaging political consensus seems to be taking hold: that tackling child poverty would be nice if we can get round to it.

What could we do? Well, experts give us plenty of options. Some focus on the need for a tax system which ensures money is redistributed. Others speak of a high-growth, low-tax economy in which employers create well-paying jobs. With a targeted approach, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust focus on shoring up our social security system, ensuring that the principle on which it was founded – that everyone should be supported through hard times – endures today through the offer of an [Essentials Guarantee](#). Underpinning everything must be the need to listen to families and parents in poverty, to ensure they're involved in identifying solutions and to work collaboratively with them.

There is, of course, no silver bullet. This is not the work of government alone. Communities have a role to play, as do friends and neighbours and all people of faith and of goodwill. We can keep an eye out for those around us in a way that government never can. But government does have a role to play in making sure that its systems do not leave children hungry. If ideological views about the size of the state get in the way of us agreeing on that, then we really do have to go back to basics.

I end where I began: with Elmo. Things are not always great, not even on Sesame Street, and certainly not in the real world. But the response to Elmo's question was fantastic. People were honest, reached out, offered warm words, extended the hand of friendship.

We too can make a difference in reaching out, accepting the offer of help, living and loving in communities where we will no longer accept poverty, starting with the way that it affects the lives of our children. Jesus celebrated children. He welcomed them and gave them a place of honour in his Kingdom. He rebuked those who got in their way. If we want our world to look more like the Kingdom of God – a fairer place than the one in

ake tackling child poverty our priority.



Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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