

Budget help for poor families condemned [GB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Campaigners working to reduce child poverty in the UK described the chancellor's announcement today of a £20 annual increase in child tax credits for the country's poorest families as a "disgraceful pittance", pointing out that the weekly increase amounted to less than the cost of a pint of milk.

Unveiling the government's headline measure aimed at helping the country's poorest, Alistair Darling said: "The government is determined to eradicate child poverty. So, first, I can announce that from April next year the child element of the child tax credit will increase by £20."

This fell far short of what charities in this sector had been hoping for. "It works out at 38 pence a week, which will make absolutely no difference whatsoever," Hilary Fisher, director of End Child Poverty, said. "I am enormously disappointed. It is a shamefully small increase."

Campaigners had asked the government to announce an increase in benefits and tax credits (a means tested benefit targeted at low income parents) totalling an extra £3bn annually, stressing that this would be the minimum needed to meet Labour's promise to halve child poverty in the UK by 2010.

"The government is now well on its way to failing to meet the 2010 target," Fisher said.

Julia Unwin, chief executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, said in order to meet that target the government should have announced a weekly increase in benefits payments of £12.50, rather than 38 pence.

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The money allocated to struggling families compared poorly with the large sums diverted to bailing out banks and businesses, Green added.

She said: "The budget urgently needed to give targeted help to struggling families who will spend straight away and give an immediate boost to the economy.

"The government is now unlikely to meet its target to halve child poverty by 2010. Without investing the £3bn in family incomes that the Campaign to End Child Poverty called for, millions of children across the UK will continue to face the unfair costs of social disadvantage, exclusion and poor health."

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"Increasingly grandparents play a big role in family life and in looking after their grandchildren," Darling said. "To reflect this, we will, for the first time, ensure these caring responsibilities for grandparents of working age will count towards their entitlement for the basic state pension."

With the cost of childcare remaining one of the greatest factors in preventing low income parents, usually mothers, from returning to work, increasing numbers are relying on support from grandparents to allow them to work.

The announcement was welcomed by grandparents support groups. Sam Smethers, chief executive of charity Grandparents Plus, said: "We warmly welcome the introduction of the grandparent NI credit. One in three working families rely on grandparental childcare. We know that working age grandmothers on low incomes are the ones who are most likely to be providing that childcare.

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- reprinted from The Guardian

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