

‘I’d make sure children in poverty were getting enough money’

Kayleigh was one of five young people in the recent documentary *Poor Kids* whose moving and eloquent accounts moved child poverty up the political agenda. She talks to **Kelly Mattison** about her life since *Poor Kids* was broadcast, while politicians and campaigners tell us about the impact of the documentary

“I know times are hard and the government has to make savings but please don’t take money away from the poorest children in society; that’s just not fair.”

This is what 16-year-old Kayleigh told Maria Miller, minister responsible for the government’s child poverty strategy, when she spoke to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty in the House of Commons last month.

Kayleigh was asked to speak following her appearance in recent BBC documentary *Poor Kids*. In the UK 3.8 million children live in poverty and Kayleigh was one of five of them who appeared in a programme that received 2.5 million viewers, drew widespread media coverage and led to questions about child poverty in the UK being raised in parliament two weeks running.

The young people featured were eloquent and often breathtakingly matter of fact about their plight. Campaigners say *Poor Kids* put child poverty back on the political map.

Although admitting that she found her trip to Westminster “really nerve racking”, Kayleigh bravely stood up to describe to Miller her own experience growing up in a poor household and answer questions from MPs.

“It’s a secret you try to keep from everyone and it eats away at your self-confidence,” she told the minister.

“You begin to think that you’re worthless. I can only remember having new clothes once – when I started secondary school. Everything else has been second hand. And I really worry about my little



brother because he has to wear my old blouses to school and gets bullied.”

In the film Kayleigh was living with her single parent dad and two younger brothers on the Braunstone estate in Leicester. But just before the film came out her dad Steve, who is only in his late thirties, collapsed with a heart attack, which doctors believe is stress related. Kayleigh is now staying with her guardian, a family friend in South Wales, while her father recovers.

Described by Poor Kids director Jezza Neumann as “an amazing and inspiring girl”, Kayleigh speaks eloquently in the film about her experience of poverty and the bullying that accompanied it. The family was struggling to get by on £80 a week, consisting of child tax credit, child benefit and Steve’s unemployment benefit. Steve lost his job a year ago and the family went from being on £400 a week to barely surviving on £400 a month.

Kayleigh was pushed and jostled in the playground and told she had nits. Although Steve raised the bullying with Kayleigh’s teachers, it only relented for a while. Kayleigh felt so worthless that she self-harmed and once tried to take her own life. Neumann says the interview in which she talked about self harming was the one that affected him most during filming. “Her bravery was inspiring,” says the BAFTA award winning director.

How was the process of filming *Poor Kids*?

“It was good because if we just wanted to talk to the people instead of the camera then we could or we’d go out on day trips and things like that and it was always relaxed and calm,” Kayleigh replies. “If you

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Government’s anti-poverty strategy

In April the coalition government launched A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families’ Lives, which sets out its approach to tackling poverty up to 2020.

It says the strategy meets the requirements set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010, focusing on improving the life chances of the most disadvantaged children, and sits alongside the government’s broader strategy to improve social mobility.

The key elements of the strategy are:

- “A stronger focus on ensuring that families who are in work are supported to work themselves out of poverty, families who are unable to work are able to live with dignity and not entrenched in persistent poverty, and that those who can work but are not in work are provided with services that will address their particular needs and help them overcome barriers to work.
- “A stronger focus on improving children’s future life chances, by intervening early to improve the development and attainment of disadvantaged children and young people throughout their transition to adulthood.
- “A stronger focus on place and delivering services as close to the family as possible, by empowering local partners and ensuring that local diversity can be recognised, and developing strong local accountability frameworks.”

“I’ve got people to talk to now when I didn’t have that before,” says Kayleigh (above)

didn't want to do something you'd just say you didn't want to do it.

"There was a lot of respect and there wasn't any prying for information. If you gave something and they wanted more information on it, they'd ask about it, but they didn't deliberately search for things."

One of the most significant changes for her since *Poor Kids* was broadcast is that many people have recognised what it is like to live in poverty. "Some of the people who used to bully me said: 'Oh my god, I never knew it was that bad.' And a lot of people have now apologised for the way that they treated me. I had forgiven everybody by the time I had left school anyway."

Now living in South Wales with her guardian she says she doesn't worry about anything at all. "I'm getting loads and loads of support here and I'm with people I trust wholeheartedly. I've got people to talk to now when I didn't have that before."

She is still in touch with the film makers and the director took her and her brother Sam out for a day trip recently. Asked what her friends' reactions have been to the programme, she laughs. "Most of them said: 'Oh my god, you're famous.'"

She continues: "If I was prime minister for the day, I'd try and change the world. I'd make sure children in poverty were getting enough money and I'd work it out to the last penny. I have a habit of doing that. I'd also make sure that you can only spend it on certain things instead of just giving people cash and saying, here you go, spend that however you like." ■



Perspectives on poverty

POOR KIDS PRODUCER BRIAN WOODS ON THE DOCUMENTARY'S UNEXPECTED IMPACT

In 1999 we made *Eyes of a Child* for BBC1, a film looking at child poverty through their eyes, and in their words. When it was commissioned the UK was just a year into Tony Blair's New Labour government. Eleven years on, as David Cameron talked of the biggest cuts in public spending in living memory, we knew it was time to check in with children living in poverty once again. Finding the right children was the challenge, and it took us months to choose Paige, Courtney (above), Sam and Kayleigh. We felt they were very special kids, and could represent the millions of children growing up in poverty really well, but we had no idea quite how great the impact of the film would be.

- 2.5 million viewers and over 272,000 views on iPlayer
- Positive editorial coverage in the *Mirror*, *Mail*, *Guardian*, *Times*, *FT*, *Independent*, *The Big Issue* in the North and *Telegraph*
- Facebook group started – over 13,000 page views and 7,000 posts. Several other Facebook groups now also started
- The hashtag #poorkids started trending on Twitter by mid-broadcast. Shortly after transmission finished, it trended at number one worldwide
- 200-plus posts on Mumsnet
- 500-plus emails so far to True Vision, most wanting to help the children
- The producer has been invited to the Labour Party conference in Liverpool to talk about child poverty.

What did Poor Kids mean to you?

When I first started campaigning on child poverty part of the difficulty was in persuading people that child poverty still existed. They said: "Oh well, these days it just means not being able to afford the latest pair of trainers."



That's why *Poor Kids* is so powerful and why I urged the prime minister to watch it. The film shows real children telling us about the impact grinding poverty has on their lives. This government must stick to the promise made by Labour to abolish child poverty. Cutting services, slashing benefits and putting people on the dole will push even more children into poverty. We need a child poverty impact assessment on everything the government does from now on, to make sure that this doesn't happen.

Kerry McCarthy, Labour MP for Bristol East and shadow Treasury minister

There are nearly four million children in poverty yet, in just one hour, *Poor Kids* managed to tell the story of

UK child poverty more powerfully than any official statistic ever could.

When so many people think that poverty doesn't exist in this country, and that it happens only in Africa, this is a real step forward. The simple act of giving voice to children changed minds and challenged preconceptions, such as poverty being the fault of selfish parents too happy to live on benefits and too lazy to work. In the days after its broadcast, we received everything from emails about donating school shoes to requests for interviews with journalists looking to understand the real issues.

If the target to end child poverty by 2020 is going to be met, it's essential voices like these, talking about what poverty does to loving families and ordinary children, continue to be heard.

Alison Garnham, chief executive, Child Poverty Action Group

The *Poor Kids* documentary really got me ranting at the TV, causing my better half Anne to say: "So what are you going to do about it then?" This led to me

doing a bit of digging around on poverty stats in my home city of Leeds, and what I found was not pretty. I put together a blog post (<http://tinyurl.com/3p6r95a>) which got a great reaction with dozens of people asking what can we do about it. Before I know it I am putting together an Innovation Lab to look at how we can disrupt poverty in Leeds. An Innovation Lab is a special meeting designed to get people thinking about the issue differently and developing fresh insights that might help. Forty or so people have already signed up for the day, which we hope will make a real difference.



If you would like to join us in thinking differently about how to disrupt poverty in Leeds on 14 October then please book your place here: <http://povertyinleeds.eventbrite.com>.

You pay what you can – but free is fine!
Mike Chitty, community development worker