

Fairer Futures Partnerships Leadership Spotlight Session

Learning Report: 18 September 2025



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In partnership with the Scottish Government, the Improvement Service are supporting colleagues delivering Fairer Future Partnerships (FFPs) with sharing learning, facilitating opportunities for peer support and collaboration around approaches, opportunities and challenges.

Part of this support includes a series of Spotlight Sessions, focused on bringing FFP colleagues together around specific themes identified as priorities by FFPs and partners, to share approaches and learning. The September session focused on Leadership with presentations from Shetland, North Ayrshire, and Clackmannanshire. This learning report offers you the chance to familiarise yourself with key learning gathered from the session.

You can watch the recording and access speaker slides in the [FFP resource pack](#).

About the Improvement Service

The Improvement Service (IS) is the go-to organisation for local government improvement in Scotland. Established in 2005, the IS supports councils and their partners to deliver better outcomes for communities, reduce inequalities, and achieve efficiencies.

We do this through leading transformation, building capacity and capability for improvement across the sector, supporting collaboration to tackle shared challenges, providing data and intelligence to inform policy and decision-making, and delivering national shared service applications and technology platforms.

Our expertise covers a wide range of areas including digital public services, performance measurement and benchmarking, transformation and change management, workforce and skills development, planning and place-based approaches, economy and employability, poverty and inequalities, and climate change.

For more information, visit our website: www.improvementservice.org.uk

Key messages

A number of key messages and learning around leadership were identified by the speakers during the session:



Collaborative Leadership: The importance of trust, relationships, and inclusive engagement were stressed as key assets. Meaningful change depends on open collaboration and shared ownership, bringing together decision-makers, frontline staff, and families. Leaders must create space for collaboration and encourage confidence in the full system not just individual teams. One of the key hopes for the future is for collaboration to begin to feel more natural, not forced, with connection and support for future planning an embedded part of the system.



Learning-orientated Leadership: Leaders embed learning in practice. They offer support to teams in recognising that achieving lasting change will take time. Failure is accepted as part of growth. Shetland's approach, for example, is grounded in understanding the local system: how teams interact, how services align, and how values are put into practice, and the FFP lead is positioned more as a system connector, rather than director, as a role focused on gathering insights and creating the conditions for lasting change.



Systems Transformation Leadership: Shetland has formed a System Change Board made up of cross-sector leaders, with an independent Chair. The Board is embedded within existing governance structures, with early steps including interviews and workshops to build trust. North Ayrshire emphasise the value of 'infiltrating spaces' with a child poverty lens to embed change, and Clackmannanshire's Family Wellbeing Partnership was built to re-align values and behaviours across public services, embedding a shared vision for tackling child poverty at the heart of system transformation.



Innovative Leadership: One of the unique benefits of Fairer Futures is feeling empowered to do things differently, to disrupt, to fail, to rethink individuals' roles and step back from rigid service delivery models and to give the permission to innovate. Teams feel encouraged and supported to try new approaches, with the space and time to experiment and reflect. Speakers said this had supported with difficult conversations around culture, and acknowledgement that meaningful, long-lasting change takes time.



Distributed Leadership: Responsibility is shared across a network of teams, sectors and services, rather than centralised in one place. This fosters a culture where everyone has a role in shaping the system, and where leadership is not defined by a position, but by values and purpose. Clackmannanshire, for example, emphasise a shift away from top-down control towards values-based, relational leadership. Shetland's FFP work is coordinated through the NHS rather than the Council, helping emphasise the role all partners have to play in tackling child poverty.



Values-based leadership: Each speaker reflected on the importance of trust, strong relationships, and collaboration and engagement across sectors and services.

Shetland approaches tackling child poverty in ways that are sustainable and person centred and Clackmannanshire emphasised person-centred team structures and relational, distributed leadership where there's a focus on building trusted relationships, and the importance of a trauma-informed and relational approach underpinning decision-making in practice,

What's been working well?

We heard from Shetland, North Ayrshire and Clackmannanshire about what's been working well, and enablers and opportunities in terms of leadership for their FFP work.

Political buy-in

Speakers highlighted the ongoing value of political buy-in to progress this work.

- North Ayrshire noted the value of a being part of a council administration led by Elected Members with a personal commitment to prioritise the eradication of child poverty, and Clackmannanshire noted that active involvement from political leaders was helping to shift dynamics and sustain momentum.

Infiltrating decision-making spaces

Speakers highlighted the need to relentlessly bring a child poverty lens to all decision-making spaces.

- For example, North Ayrshire's approach to infiltrating decision-making spaces with a child poverty lens has allowed them to embed the child poverty strategy team permanently within North Ayrshire Council and carry out work such as the development of an action report for the No Wrong Door and Single Shared Assessment which aims to reduce duplication and ensure families only need to share their circumstances once. Being a part of decision-making structures has enabled the team to get agreement around joint strategic plans for child poverty, children's rights and children's services planning, work closely with the Community Planning Partnership Board and engage with North Ayrshire Council's Executive Leadership Team.

The importance of data and evidence

A lack of data/evidence can be both a barrier but also help bring focus to the work.

- For example, North Ayrshire has seen a recent reduction in child poverty rates. In 2023, after housing costs, the child poverty rate was 29.2% and over the following year it decreased to 24.3%. The Council and its partners recognised that strengthened evidence could have supported them in identifying and communicating the reasons why child poverty rates reduced. This lack of evidence encouraged them to carry out further work in identifying how leadership and partnership working could be better aligned to understand and sustain progress in reducing child poverty locally.

Culture change and power sharing

Speakers highlighted the need for real, meaningful power sharing within their own organisations, with partners and with communities to build trust and commitment in this work. For example:

- Shetland described the establishment of a new System Change Board, built on the legacy of their Anchor Programme Board, to support the development of trust and engagement across decision-makers, frontline staff, and families. The board is being built slowly and deliberately and work is ongoing to embed the Board within existing governance structures.

- The Clackmannanshire Transformation Space is designed to strengthen citizen engagement in shaping Council spending priorities and to put the Christie principles into practice. The community are at the heart of this space, and they are key to prioritising decision making and understanding. Insights gathered through a citizens panel will feed into the Wellbeing Board and the Clackmannanshire Alliance. Staying aligned with national policy and funding models remains essential, but maintaining community trust requires genuine power sharing and visible action.
- Clackmannanshire also shared that, as part of this work, the Council have begun to restructure and integrate services. This led to embedded distributed leadership where people could share power and trust each other, and not rely on hierarchical positions, with an emphasis on permission to do things differently. They prioritised values, culture, and behaviours, and over time it became more about people and not posts, which helped embed this journey. They carried out a deliberate shift in leadership style - moving away from top-down approaches toward relational, preventative, and person-centred leadership.

Feedback loops, learning and communication

Speakers highlighted the need for taking the time to understand how the current systems work, fostering a learning culture and continually sharing learning to build momentum and give people hope for change. For example:

- North Ayrshire are focusing on gathering learning and considering how to share this in a way that influences wider change – contributing to public service reform and building confidence that this kind of work is not only necessary, but possible.
- Shetland's focus has been on understanding how the local system functions, not just how individual teams operate, but how the whole system works together. They've used questionnaires, informal conversations, and a recent workshop with the Community Planning Network to explore questions like: How person-centred is our support? How well do we partner across sectors? How effectively do we capture and share learning?
- Clackmannanshire recognise the importance of learning alongside delivery, even when learning can feel like a barrier in the moment. Identifying and taking the time for learning can initially be seen as a barrier, but on reflection, the importance of ensuring learning is embedded in the system is recognised as crucial in this work.

Focused priorities and governance

Speakers highlighted the value of aligning FFP work with existing local strategic priorities, or working more broadly to declutter the strategic and reporting landscape. For example:

- North Ayrshire has worked to integrate their efforts with existing priorities, particularly the ROIC framework, and to align with the Council's transition to a wellbeing economy. When Fairer Futures funding was confirmed, a previously established Child Poverty and Cost of Living Board was disbanded, and its responsibilities were absorbed into the Community Planning Partnership Board. This created a more integrated space for oversight and strategic direction. The team reports into this board and works closely with senior officers, including the Chief Executive and Director of Education.

- Clackmannanshire's early work has led to the development of a "one fund, one plan, one report" approach. This integrated structure has streamlined 127 outcomes across multiple plans into just six core outcomes and 15 key actions. Their strategic priorities sit at the top, supported by embedded plans from the Community Planning Partnership and other local frameworks. This collaborative model challenges leadership thinking at all levels, helping sharpen focus on where resources and funding are directed. The governance model is intentionally circular rather than hierarchical and legitimises values-based leadership and aligning distributed action with broader strategy and policy. This structure was designed to shift power dynamics and promote greater equity and shared accountability across public services, citizens and the third sector and other communities, which helps embed those values into processes and programmes.

What are some of the key challenges?

We heard from Shetland, North Ayrshire and Clackmannanshire about some of the barriers and challenges in terms of leadership for their FFP work.

Workforce wellbeing and capacity impacting shift towards a preventative approach

- Staff across services and systems feel they are working over capacity and are often too busy delivering high-quality services to find time for cross-sector conversations, and the FFP work can risk being seen as a “nice to do” rather than essential.
- Frontline workers are often ‘wearing multiple hats’, describing a culture of multiple responsibilities per person. This adds difficulty to the ambition of shifting resources towards a preventative approach to tackling child poverty and wider inequality, especially in smaller local areas where small changes can have big impacts.

Understanding and trusting the wider system

- Individual teams often feel they’re working effectively, there’s less confidence from colleagues and partners in how the wider system functions. This gap highlights the need for leadership support to create space for collaboration. North Ayrshire also commented on a lack of confidence and security in decision-making with regards to embracing community-led activities as valid alternatives to traditional services and supporting communities to participate meaningfully in broader decision-making spaces.
- Short-term funding for services can sometimes add to fragmentation rather than reduce it; for example, Shetland highlighted that their Anchor programme became seen as the “right door” for families and communities, inadvertently making other services feel like the “wrong” door.
- Navigating multiple plans and strategies whilst recording and reporting with no streamlined collation of data or agreed metrics can create a challenging culture for change.
- Timing for change is crucial as staff and services are having to balance innovation with the ongoing delivery of core and crisis services.

Evidencing impact

- There continue to be challenges in evidencing impact, and in accessing data to evidence the impact of longer-term ambitions and capacity to make use of that data for decision making and communication.

Speaker inputs and slides

Shetland

Sarah Dempster (Planning, Performance & Projects Officer, NHS Shetland) introduced the Shetland FFP.

Shetland's FFP is focused on addressing child poverty and broader inequality in Shetland in ways that are sustainable, and person centred. Fairer Futures in Shetland is not about launching new standalone interventions, but about how they services and partners work together differently.

[Access Shetland's input and slides here.](#)

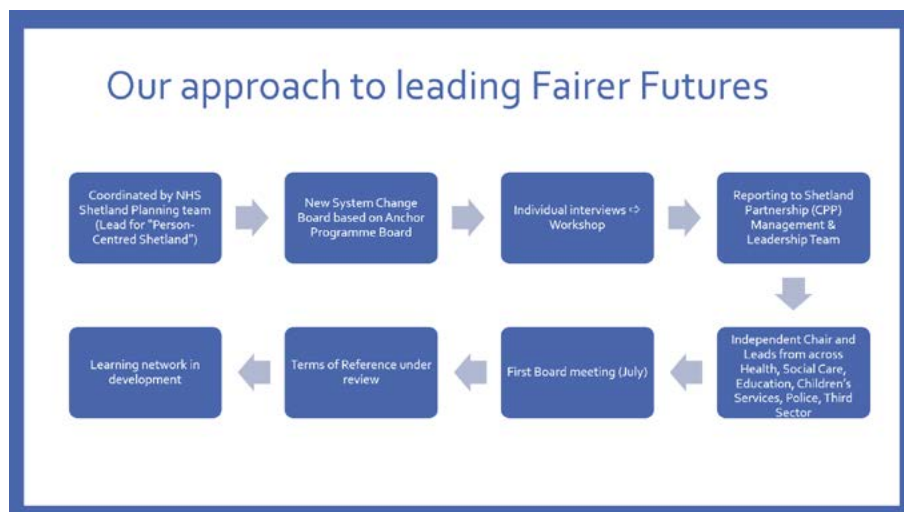


Figure 1: Shetland's Approach to leading Fairer Futures

“ We learned from a recent project ‘good mental health for all’ that addressing the issues that people are experiencing really does require that collaboration across services and sectors. So that’s what we’re looking at – what do we need to do to embed the system change that was needed back then? Fairer Futures here is not about setting up another stand-alone intervention. We’re emphasising how we work together differently. And we know from past learning the importance of trusting relationships, of engaging with decisionmakers alongside people, facing staff and families, and building in time for learning. ”

Sarah Dempster, NHS Shetland

North Ayrshire

Donna Martin (Strategy & Programme Manager (Child Poverty), North Ayrshire Council) introduced the North Ayrshire FFP.

North Ayrshire's FFP was established in January 2025, in the tranche following the Pathfinders. It's led by a newly formed child poverty strategy team within the council, bringing together expertise from local government, education, and the third sector.

[Access North Ayrshires input and slides here.](#)

Context, aims, and overview of approach

- North Ayrshire introduced a new child poverty strategy team in January.



Figure 2: North Ayrshire's Leadership Approach

FFPs in Practice

An additional key area of work that North Ayrshire highlighted as an opportunity brought about through their FFP leadership, is the development of an action report for the no wrong door and single shared assessment. The purpose behind this approach is to reduce duplication and ensure families only need to share their circumstances once.

“ We've been supported to say that if we're going to make this meaningful, long-lasting change, we totally appreciate that it's going to take time. ”

Donna Martin, North Ayrshire Council

Clackmannanshire

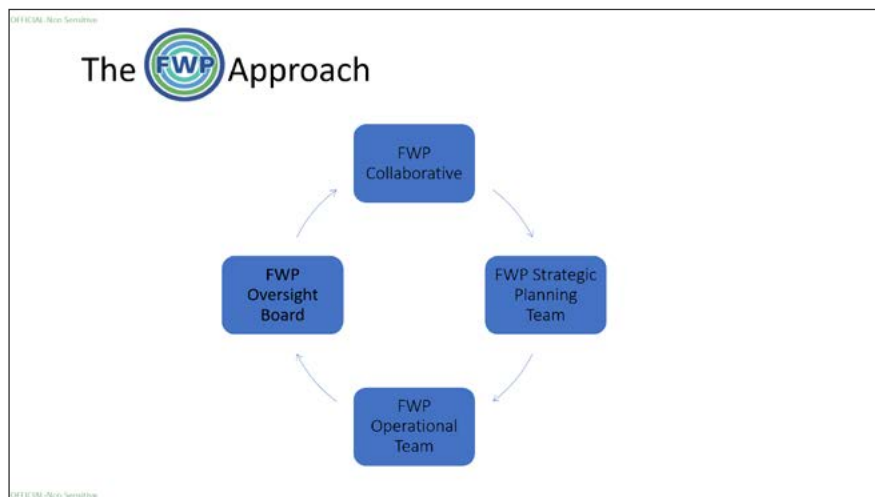
Veronica Cully (Family Wellbeing Partnership Programme Manager and Poverty Lead, Clackmannanshire Council) introduced Clackmannanshire's Family Wellbeing Partnership.

Clackmannanshire's journey of change began around five years ago, working closely with Scottish Government colleagues, SIT partners, and the Hunter Foundation. From the outset, the vision was clear: to realign values, cultures, and behaviours across service design and delivery so that poverty and inequality could be tackled head-on. However, despite a clear identification of goals at an early stage, detailed plans only began to take shape about two years into the journey. The team focused on building a system where children and families could access the right support at the right time and in the right place. This led to the development of the Family Wellbeing Partnership as a way of working, which they now aim to embed across the Council and within communities.

[Access Clackmannanshire's input and slides here.](#)

“ We embraced distributed leadership where people could share power and trust; and trust each other. ”

Veronica Cully, Clackmannanshire Council



FFPs in Practice

Clackmannanshire is focused on deepening its work with the wider community, recognising that **as a small authority, lasting change requires collective effort**. Over time, they've built the capacity of individuals and groups, encouraging staff to support communities in developing their own skills and fostering innovation. **One early example involved a group of parents trialling a cash-first approach using Wellbeing funding**. That experience led to a successful bid into a Council-run entrepreneurship fund, and since then, more community members have become involved with many now leading successful community events, for example, a community around the school class, and more recently, they've worked with 'What Matters to You'.

Contact us

Improvement Service Team: psr@improvementservice.org.uk

Scottish Government Team: placebasedsocialjustice@gov.scot



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