

West Lothian Council's 'Unmet Need' Project

A SAVVI Learning Example



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Overview

In 2023, West Lothian Council partnered with the Improvement Service to tackle child poverty through a particular approach: targeting families with children who were eligible for financial support but were currently not claiming all their entitlements. The approach drew on learning from earlier Improvement Service intelligence sprints with remote and island councils, as well as replicating aspects of work with the Scottish Borders Council. The initial focus was practical and tightly framed around understanding unmet need for education-related entitlements, such as Free School Meals (FSM), School Clothing Grants (SCG) and Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). For this project, the definition of a child is anyone under the age of 18 (as EMA would not be applicable for those under 16). There was a strong focus on respecting privacy and proportionality throughout the set-up of the project.

From the outset, the project was designed to inform action. It combined locally held administrative data with publicly available statistics to map where uptake of educational-related support was lower than expected compared to child poverty rates (using Children in Low Income Families (CLIF) data). In 2024, the team secured Child Poverty Accelerator Funding (CPAF) to expand the datasets, include advice support, present the analysis more accessibly through an interactive dashboard, and link insights to outreach and service delivery. The shared goal across West Lothian Council and the Improvement Service was simple: make it easier to see areas of unmet need, then show up in those places with a practical offer of support.

Remit

West Lothian Council's remit sits within established public duties and powers. Local authorities in Scotland hold a general power to advance wellbeing and to work with Community Planning partners to improve outcomes and reduce inequalities. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 places a duty on local authorities to report on income maximisation for pregnant women and families with children under 16. A range of legislation governs the use and sharing of social security data; principally, the Social Security Administration Act 1992 and the Welfare Reform Act 2012 (for UK government administered benefits) and the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 (for devolved benefits).

To hold with the principle of data minimisation and to increase privacy, the West Lothian project worked at data zone level rather than identifying individual households. It was decided that, at this granularity, a formal Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) was not required. However, Information Governance advice was sought where reuse of Council Tax Reduction data may involve the re-use of DWP/HMRC derived data (see below for more detail).

Data types and availability

The initial project compared child poverty rates at data zone level against the uptake of free school meals, school clothing grants and educational maintenance benefits. With CPAF the data set was expanded – although the data that was initially mapped and planned for inclusion has not ended up being the data that has been most easily and readily available. The initial goal was to include publicly available data on Universal Credit (UC) in households with children, as well as data from Social Security Scotland, including Best Start Grants and Scottish Child Payments.

While the UC data is currently in use, Social Security Scotland (SSS) data has been delayed. When contacted, SSS signaled that their aim was to provide data on these benefits to all 32 local authorities, rather than on an authority-by-authority basis. West Lothian Council and the Improvement Service submitted a multi-authority request to help advance that route, but this has not aligned with the CPAF delivery timeframe.

Data sources by status

Data	Source	In Dashboard
Children in Low Income Families (CLIF)	DWP (Stat-Xplore)	Yes
Free School Meals	Education (SEEMIS)	Yes
School Clothing Grant	Education (SEEMIS)	Yes
Educational Maintenance Allowance	Education (SEEMIS)	Yes
Universal Credit households with children	DWP (Stat-Xplore)	Yes
Housing Arrears	WLC	Yes – as Index
Council Tax Arrears	WLC	Yes – as Index
Food Bank Usage	Food Network	Yes – as Index
Advice Service Data (including Citizens Advice Bureau)	WL Advice Shop + Citizens Advice Scot	Yes – as Index
ACORN and Paycheck (Disposable income)	CACI	Yes
Council Tax Reduction	WLC	No*
Eligible 2s	WLC	No*
Scottish Child Payment	Social Security Scotland	No
Best Start Grant	Social Security Scotland	No
Best Start Foods	Social Security Scotland	No

*In progress but not active on the dashboard

Alongside access to these external data sets, one of the goals of the project was to identify and access other available council-held data that could be used. This included working towards gaining access to data on two-year-olds who are eligible for council-funded nursery hours (Eligible 2's) to gain information on families with children under 5. While this dataset was initially considered a secondary one, it was prioritised when the SSS data was delayed. The team also brought in community datasets: Trussell Trust food bank data at postcode level, Food Network activity at locality level, and School Bank data linked to schools (anonymous at school level). Advice activity volumes were also assembled at data zone level across Advice Shops and the Citizens Advice Bureau to explore where advice uptake appeared lower than expected. Internally, they supplemented this with data on those with housing benefit and arrears, those with Council Tax arrears, as well as commercial indicators from CACI (ACORN neighbourhood categories and Paycheck / Paycheck Disposable Income). Some of the smaller data sets (food bank usage, housing arrears, and council tax arrears) were not practicably usable within the dashboard, so the team has combined them into a single data set that is more statistically robust at data zone level.

Obtaining education data from the SEEMIS system was easy and straightforward in 2023 and again in 2025, thanks to proximity of teams and a clear understanding of the use case. West Lothian Council agreed to use anonymised 'Eligible 2's' information at the datazone level but are still considering how to best display this information in their dashboard.

There was a distinct challenge around gaining access to Council Tax Reduction (CTR) data. Although CTR is a local scheme, verification workflows rely on DWP/HMRC data. Reuse for analytical purposes therefore required careful navigation of memoranda of understanding and internal governance. Even with analogous use cases elsewhere in Scotland, approval timelines were prolonged.

Reporting and Dashboard

The Improvement Service developed an interactive dashboard and provided West Lothian Council with a working version for local, internal use. Although some data was originally at postcode level, all data was aggregated to the data zone level for use in the dashboard. The use of NHS and Health Visitor data was explored, but the available reporting geographies were poorly aligned with the rest of the data, limiting their usability. Despite these constraints, the dashboard proved effective at highlighting outliers and framing conversations with services about where to prioritise outreach. Time-series views helped local teams see, for example, where demand for advice rose while uptake of school-related support fell, reinforcing the case for targeted campaigns in those places.

The dashboard itself includes a landing page, which was added following feedback from a lived experience panel. The landing page provides an overview of the project and clarifies terminology (i.e. 'Unmet Need'). It gives plain English instructions as to how to get the most out of using the dashboard and includes a guidance video, giving a walkthrough of the functionality of the dashboard. The modeling behind the estimated uptake figures is also explained, as early feedback found that users were sometimes confused by what it meant when an area had higher than expected uptake. Some were concerned that this implied potential benefits fraud, when it

simply means that the uptake is higher than what would normally be expected (the average).

In addition to the landing page, they have also added a brief explanation of what each page does and how it should be used, as well as pop-ups to include additional information as needed. In response to user testing they have also ensured that the map has an entire page to itself, and the main table is on a separate pages to ensure ease of use and readability. On the table page the user can filter by a number of attributes, and they also have the option of downloading the data as CSV, Excel, or PDF. The other main way that users can examine the data is by viewing changes over time. At the time of writing this is just for the education data, which is the only data they have multiple years for, but as more years data is added, this functionality will be applicable to more datasets. When a single dataset and a single data zone is selected, the user can see the change in uptake over time.

Finally, the dashboard includes methodology pages - one general overview methodology page, and then a separate page with details on each different data set.

Actioning Outreach and Support

Linking insight to action has been central to this project. After the Improvement Service refreshed the dashboard in late May 2025, Stoneyburn emerged as a priority area: two adjacent data zones - Breich Valley 03 and 04 - showed significant unmet need regarding free school meals, with earlier analysis in 2023 pointing to similar patterns. Dedridge/Livingston South also showed unmet need in both school meals and clothing grant uptake. The Advice Shop, working with Community Regeneration Officers and local partners, designed outreach that piggybacked on existing community offers rather than creating new events from scratch.

In Stoneyburn, the team chose to join up with the Stoneyburn & Bents Future Vision Group's (SBFVG) regular 'Food Outlet'/coffee drop-ins, advertised through SBFVG's Facebook and quarterly newsletter. They also worked with local schools to issue group calls to parents. Early outreach efforts had limited impact, attracting a small number of clients with varied needs, including energy support and assistance with alcohol and drug partnership referrals. The team explored a door-knocking campaign, but due to limited staff capacity, they would not have the numbers to meet the council's two-staff safety rule. Instead, they secured virtual introductions to head teachers, sent out newsletter articles, continued engaging in group calls and continued monthly drop-ins with the SBFVG Food Outlet.

In Dedridge/Livingston South, the approach differed. After coordinating with the Community Regeneration Officer, the team sent letters to households across the target streets, inviting residents to engage and signposting that staff would be present at a local Community Centre for face-to-face support. These sessions were then coupled with the area's regular outreach offer, allowing the council to meet people where they already were.

Whether someone came via a drop-in or was contacted via a school group call, a letter, or a phone call, the service offer was consistent: a holistic benefit 'health check' followed by help to claim missing entitlements and resolve practical issues which may increase household costs. Advice Shop caseworkers checked Universal Credit elements (e.g., disabled child, carer components), helped update rent figures, assessed eligibility for educational benefits,

processed Discretionary Housing Payment applications, addressed Council Tax arrears, and signposted to energy advice, fuel vouchers and budgeting support. Outcomes were recorded in West Lothian Council's internal AdvicePro software and counted using annualised gains (e.g., a £500/month award recorded as £6,000 per annum), alongside one-off grants, debt write-offs and savings. This approach acknowledged that even if someone was not entitled to the specific education benefit flagged by the dashboard - because of earnings thresholds - they might still be missing other income or paying avoidable costs.

By autumn 2025, the dashboard's 'advice layer' had highlighted nine data zones with lower-than-expected advice uptake, giving the council a focused set of places for the next wave of engagement. In Stoneyburn, co-located sessions yielded a handful of cases with tangible outcomes (e.g., energy support, benefit checks), while Dedridge's targeted letters brought residents into existing outreach sessions where more detailed casework could be undertaken. While outreach and support are captured within their AdvicePro systems, the system does not have the capability to identify the origin of the contact with an individual; all recording starts at the point at which the individual contacts the council. It is therefore not likely to capture the extent to which any increased footfall or phone calls are caused by outreach connected to the 'Unmet Needs' project. At present, however, qualitative learning about which messages resonate, which channels are trusted, and which venues and sessions are most popular, has already begun to shape the next phase of planning.

Challenges and Learning

Several constraints were persistent throughout the project. The absence (thus far) of SSS data for Scottish Child Payment and Best Start benefits reduced the completeness of the teams' understanding of circumstances for families with younger children, prompting the team to assemble a broader set of proxy datasets. Council Tax Reduction data reuse, despite being valuable for profiling, has required careful negotiation - particularly with the data re-use application - because operational verification processes depend on DWP/HMRC data. Geography mismatches have meant certain datasets could not be included in the analysis, complicating the production of a single unified index. Additionally, not all data was limited to households with children, and there was a desire to keep these different types of data sets separate within the dashboard.

The team's view has been pragmatic: focus on what can be shared quickly, build a useful picture at data zone level, and keep working towards more granular data where lawful and appropriate. However, one point of reflection from this project is that having limited access to a few key datasets can increase the complexity of data use and re-use. While part of the goal was always to explore what internal data could be used, the inability to draw down SSS indicators at data zone level led to more data being prioritised for this purpose - including the re-use of 'Eligible 2's' data and sharing food bank, school bank, locality-level activity and commercially modelled data. Each of these came with their own processes, sharing agreements, geographical limitations and caveats. Paradoxically, this made governance more complex, even as the data analysis remained privacy-preserving.

Other reflections are that, despite many data sets being examined and shared, there was only

one new data set added within the last year. Part of this could be improved in the future through clearer communication regarding what a data set needs to be able to do prior to agreeing whether they should be shared; and part of it could be improved by increasing internal data standardisation to help with data linkage.

In terms of outreach, engagement continues to be an ongoing challenge, which will be addressed in the 'Next Steps' section below.

Next Steps

The immediate priorities are to:

- Maintain the internal dashboard and develop an external-facing view for partners
- Continue place-based, coordinated engagement and outreach

A light-touch evaluation led by A Place in Childhood is ongoing, and once SSS data becomes available the team plans to revisit the risk model, rerun comparisons, and document which indicators add most value.

Following a successful application for CPAF round three, West Lothian Council will be funding a post specifically focused on engaging with people in these areas to gain a better understanding of the barriers to engaging with advice services. Edinburgh City Council was also successful in a CPAF application based on replicating this approach with a particular focus on engagement, working with the Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights. The learning from these two CPAF projects should enable additional insights into successful outreach and uptake going forward.

There has been ongoing interest in this area of work from other local authorities as well. Versions of this dashboard have been created for East Lothian and South Ayrshire, with East Lothian currently in the process of identifying additional data to add beyond the standard data used in the dashboard (education benefits, universal credit, and CLIF rates). Falkirk is also interested in replicating the approach and is working on identifying additional data on poverty more generally, although no dashboard has been set up for them at the time of writing.

Future areas to explore based on external reference group feedback includes:

- Collecting and analysing internal council use data
- Adding the child population in the dashboard, with appropriate measures for protecting privacy in low-population data zones
- Matching (estimate) data zones with school catchment areas, increasing collaborative working with schools who are in areas with lower-than-expected uptake
- Developing one or more case studies of families who have engaged – what was keeping them from accessing these supports before, and what difference the outreach from the council made

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