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ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE

Child Poverty and Climate Change



Elected Members Briefing Series

The Improvement Service (IS) has developed an Elected Members Briefing Series to help elected members keep pace with key issues affecting local government.

Some briefing notes are directly produced by IS staff but we also make available material from a wide range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services.

We will use the IS website and elected member e-bulletin to publicise and provide access to the briefing notes. [All briefing notes](#) in the series can be accessed on the IS website.

About this briefing note

Climate change and child poverty are two of the most pressing challenges facing Scotland today. These issues are deeply interconnected, with vulnerable communities, particularly children, bearing the brunt of both environmental and economic hardships. By addressing these challenges together, elected members can support the delivery of co-benefits that improve the lives of children and families while advancing Scotland's climate goals. Local authorities have a unique opportunity to lead this effort by integrating climate action with poverty reduction strategies, ensuring a just transition that leaves no one behind.

This briefing explores the intersection of these challenges and provides practical steps for elected members to drive meaningful change in their communities.

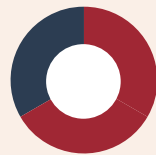
What is the issue and why does it matter?

Climate change and child poverty are deeply interconnected, with vulnerable communities bearing the brunt of both environmental and economic challenges. Low-income families are disproportionately affected, exacerbating the risk of more children falling into poverty. For example, in Shetland, a young woman highlights how climate change-driven extreme weather disrupts food supplies, isolates children from their families, and threatens livelihoods. These disruptions worsen food insecurity, limit access to education, and deepen financial hardship, underscoring the urgent need for climate action to protect vulnerable communities (See Key facts).¹

Key facts²



One in four children in Scotland lives in poverty.



More than **two thirds** of children in poverty live in working households.

Around **40%** of children in lone-parent households in Scotland live in poverty.



Glasgow has the highest child poverty rate in Scotland, with **32%** of children living in poverty after housing costs. In contrast, **East Renfrewshire** has the lowest rate at **11%**.



10% of households with children in Scotland reported experiencing food insecurity in 2022, with many relying on food banks.

17% of children across Scotland face hunger and hardship – compared to **12%** of all people across Scotland.

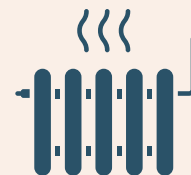


1 in 22 homes and **1 in 13** non-residential properties in Scotland are at risk of flooding by 2025.



Fuel poverty rates in 2023 have increased to **34%**, and **19.4%** of all households were in extreme fuel poverty (Scottish Government, 2025).³

By 2080, the number of homes, businesses, and services at risk of flooding is expected to **rise by approximately 40%**, with the total number of properties at risk increasing from 284,000 to nearly **400,000** (Scottish Government, 2024).⁴



- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmlh6dlBydA>
- Scottish Government (2024) Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2020-23
- Scottish Government (2025) Scottish House Condition Survey 2023
- Scottish Government (2024) National Flood Resilience Strategy, December 2024

Climate change intensifies these challenges by increasing the frequency of extreme weather events, such as flooding, and driving up energy costs. According to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA), 1 in 22 homes and 1 in 13 non-residential properties in Scotland are at risk of flooding by 2025 ([SEPA, 2025](#)).⁵ Alarming, SEPA projects that flood risk across Scotland could increase by around 40% by the 2080s due to climate change ([SEPA, 2024](#)).⁶ This would mean nearly 400,000 properties at risk of flooding posing a significant threat to communities and infrastructure ([Scottish Government, 2024](#)).⁷ For children in poverty, this means greater exposure to displacement, health risks, disrupted education, and long-term economic hardship, further entrenching cycles of disadvantage.

Furthermore, climate change and rising energy costs have been significant drivers of the inflation surge in the UK since 2021. Between 2022 and 2023, food bills increased by an estimated £605 compared to 2021 levels, with climate change responsible for £361 (60%) of this rise and higher energy prices contributing £244 (40%). Furthermore, climate change has directly influenced rising energy costs through several mechanisms. Extreme weather events—such as the record-breaking heatwaves in 2022 and widespread flooding in 2021 and 2023—have disrupted agricultural production, reducing supply and pushing up food prices. For example, the 2022 heatwave caused significant damage to staple crops like potatoes and vegetables, leading to shortages and price increases ([DEFRA, 2024](#)).⁸

These rising costs have had a profound impact on households across Scotland. In 2022, 31% of households were in fuel poverty, a figure that rose to 34% in 2023, meaning they spent more than 10% of their income on heating. This financial strain has pushed more families into poverty, worsening health inequalities and affecting children ([Scottish Government, 2022](#)).⁹

Moreover, children living in poverty are more likely to suffer from respiratory problems, such as asthma, and other long-term health issues due to prolonged exposure to poor air quality largely caused by emissions from human activities. For example, air pollution contributed to 2,700 deaths in Scotland in 2019 ([UK Health Security Agency, 2022](#)).¹⁰ A study conducted in Dundee further highlights this issue, showing a clear link between air pollution and increased hospital admissions for respiratory conditions among children ([Fitton et al., 2023](#)).¹¹ Although Scotland generally has one of the toughest anti-

5. [Scottish Environment Protection Agency \(2025\) Flooding guide for communities](#)

6. [Scottish Environment Protection Agency \(2024\) Review of areas most at risk of flooding across Scotland](#)

7. [Scottish Government \(2024\) National Flood Resilience Strategy, December 2024](#)

8. [Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs \(2024\) Agriculture in the United Kingdom 2023, July 2024](#)

9. Children can encounter pollution peaks on the school journey, at school gates, and in school playgrounds. Nearby traffic is a key determinant of concentrations outside schools; and factors relating to planning and urban design – such as the type of playground paving and amount of surrounding green space – can influence school site pollutant concentrations. [Scottish Government \(2022\) Scottish House Condition Survey..](#)

10. [UK Health Security Agency \(2022\) Chemical Hazards and Poisons Report: Issue 28 – June 2022](#)

11. Fitton C.A., Cox, B., Stewart, M., Chalmers, J., Belch, J.J.F. (2023). [Respiratory Admissions Linked to Air Pollution in a Medium Sized City of the UK: A Case-crossover Study](#). *Aerosol Air Qual. Res.* 23, 230062.

pollution legislation in Europe, however, this legislation is not cascading down at local level ([Fitton et al., 2021](#); [Shah et al., 2013](#)).^{12,13}

The combination of rising living costs, fuel poverty, and environmental hazards creates a cycle of disadvantage that deepens child poverty and exacerbates health inequalities, leaving children in deprived areas at greater risk of long-term health complications.¹⁴

Recognising the urgency of these interconnected challenges, Scotland has set ambitious legal targets to tackle both climate change and child poverty. The [Child Poverty \(Scotland\) Act 2017](#) requires the Scottish Government to reduce child poverty to less than 10% by 2030 (see Box 2). The Act places a duty on local authorities and regional health boards in Scotland to collaboratively produce annual, joint Local Child Poverty Action Reports (LCPARs) describing ongoing and planned action to tackle child poverty at local level as set out in the [National Guidance](#). Meanwhile, the [Climate Change \(Emissions Reduction Targets\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#) commits Scotland to achieving net-zero emissions by 2045. These dual objectives provide a unique opportunity to align climate action with poverty reduction efforts.

Additionally, the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\) \(Incorporation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#) reinforces this alignment by embedding children's rights into domestic law, ensuring that policies addressing poverty and climate change are designed with the best interests of children at their core. Particularly, [Article 27](#) and [Article 24](#) ensure children's right to an adequate standard of living, including access to nutritious food, safe housing, and healthcare. It underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of child poverty, such as rising energy costs and food insecurity, which are exacerbated by climate change. Also, the [General Comment No. 26 \(2023\)](#) focuses on children's rights and the environment with a particular emphasis on climate change. It calls for policies that address air pollution, extreme weather events, and other climate-related risks that affect children living in poverty.

In this context, [Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments](#) (CRWIAs) could serve as a valuable tool to systematically evaluate how policies and interventions impact children's rights and wellbeing, particularly in relation to climate change. By incorporating a climate change lens into CRWIAs, policymakers can better understand and mitigate the disproportionate effects of environmental degradation and climate-related risks on children, especially those living in poverty. Furthermore, the [Fairer Scotland Duty](#) assessment could complement this approach by ensuring that socioeconomic inequalities are addressed in tandem with climate action.

The above legislative frameworks and tools create a robust foundation for integrated action on child poverty and climate change. The Scottish Government has taken steps to address child poverty focusing its policies around three main drivers: income

12. [Fitton et al. \(2021\) An 18-year data-linkage study on the association between air pollution and acute limb ischaemia. *Vasa*.](#)

13. [Shah et al. \(2013\) Global association of air pollution and heart failure: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet*, 382\(9897\), 1039-1048.](#)

14. [Road traffic is responsible for 28% of NO2 air pollution in the UK \(GOV.UK, 2022\)](#)

from employment, costs of living, and income from social security and benefits in-kind ([Scottish Government, 2023](#)).¹⁵ Similarly, the UK Government has introduced a range of support measures for 2023-2024, including the Extension of the Energy Price Guarantee (EPG), Cost of Living Payments, Disability Cost of Living Payment, and Pensioner Cost of Living Payment. These measures aim to alleviate immediate financial pressures on households, particularly during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, which has highlighted the systemic challenges families face when household budgets and resilience are strained.

Scotland's [Child Poverty Targets](#) and [National Actions](#)



Scotland's Child Poverty Targets:

By 2030 less than:

- 10% of children are in relative poverty;
- 5% of children are in absolute poverty;
- 5% of children are in combined low income and material deprivation; and
- 5% of children are in persistent poverty.



National actions to eradicate child poverty:

- The [Scottish Child Payment](#) to help low-income families with children under 16;
- Expanding access to [childcare services](#) to support low-income parents into work;
- The [Child Poverty Accelerator Fund](#) which provides grants to projects to test new ways of tackling the root causes of child poverty;
- Widening eligibility for [Best Start Foods](#), which helps low-income families access nutritious food;
- Providing free bus travel to children and young people.

Climate mitigation and adaptation measures provide an opportunity to tackle child poverty through targeted investments in sustainable infrastructure, energy efficiency, and community resilience. Mitigation efforts, such as improving home insulation and expanding access to affordable renewable energy, can lower household energy costs, reducing financial pressure on low-income families. Adaptation measures, including flood protection, urban greening, and climate-resilient housing, create safer and healthier living environments for children in deprived communities. By integrating poverty reduction into climate policies, these measures can improve living standards, enhance economic opportunities, and build long-term resilience for vulnerable families.

15. [Scottish Government \(2023\) Tackling child poverty - progress report 2022 to 2023](#)

The Improvement Service [collaborates with local authorities and health boards](#) to support the development of Local Child Poverty Action Reports (LCPARs). It acts as a child poverty champion by sharing best practices and ensuring these reports effectively drive efforts to tackle child poverty in Scotland. Additionally, the [Improvement Service](#) works with national partners and local authorities to support the delivery of climate strategies, promote climate action, and facilitate a just transition to a net-zero economy.

Addressing child poverty in Scotland requires a multi-faceted approach that not only tackles income and living costs but also builds resilience to the impacts of climate change. This requires integrated policies that prioritise affordable energy, climate-resilient infrastructure, and targeted support for vulnerable families with children, ensuring a just transition to a sustainable future. This also requires a focus on intergenerational equity, ensuring that climate policies protect the rights and wellbeing of children and young people.



What does this mean for elected members?

Elected members play a crucial role in addressing the dual challenges of climate change and child poverty. By integrating climate action with poverty reduction strategies, local authorities can deliver co-benefits that improve the lives of children and families while advancing Scotland's net-zero goals.

Key areas for action

Decision-making and scrutiny

Elected members play a crucial role in ensuring that climate policies and projects are assessed for their impact on child poverty. For instance, retrofitting programs can be designed to prioritise low-income households, as these initiatives can significantly reduce energy bills and improve living conditions for vulnerable families. To ensure these programs are effective and equitable, elected members could advocate for the use of Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments (CRWIAs) with a climate change lens. This would help identify how such initiatives affect children's rights and wellbeing, particularly in low-income households.

Additionally, it is essential to scrutinise local authority budgets to ensure that climate investments also address poverty reduction. This includes allocating funds for energy-efficient social housing, which not only lowers carbon emissions but also alleviates fuel poverty, creating warmer and healthier homes for children and families in need. By integrating climate action with poverty reduction strategies, elected members can deliver co-benefits that improve the lives of vulnerable communities while advancing Scotland's climate goals.

As an elected member, you could consider:

- How is the impact of climate policies on child poverty assessed?
- Are budgets scrutinised to ensure climate investments also contribute to poverty reduction?
- What mechanisms are in place to monitor the co-benefits of climate actions on child poverty reduction?

Strategy and policy development

Elected members have a vital role in developing integrated strategies that align climate action with child poverty reduction. For example, climate adaptation projects can be linked to job creation and skills training opportunities, providing low-income families

with pathways to economic stability while contributing to Scotland's net-zero goals. Additionally, these projects can deliver wider community benefits, such as supporting local groups, strengthening community networks, and improving local infrastructure such as better public transport. Also local residents might be involved in decision-making processes or benefit from shared resources like community-owned energy projects.

Furthermore, climate adaptation plans, such as flood defences, could prioritise vulnerable communities, particularly those with high levels of child poverty. By ensuring that these plans address the specific needs of at-risk populations, elected members can help mitigate the disproportionate impact of climate change on children and families living in poverty, fostering resilience and equity in the face of environmental challenges.

As an elected member, you could consider:

- How are climate adaptation plans prioritising vulnerable communities with high levels of child poverty?
- Are integrated strategies being developed to align climate action with child poverty reduction?
- How does your council ensure that climate policies do not disproportionately burden low-income households?

Community leadership and partnership working

Elected members can play a pivotal role by working closely with community organisations, schools, and families to co-design climate initiatives that address local needs. For example, supporting projects like community gardens or energy efficiency programs can empower communities, reduce food insecurity, and lower energy costs for low-income households. Moreover, empowering children and young people to participate in climate initiatives ensures that future generations' voices shape climate policies.

Additionally, elected members can advocate for policies that ensure a just transition, safeguarding low-income families from the potential financial burdens of climate action while maximising the benefits. By prioritising equity and inclusion in climate strategies, elected members can help create a fair and sustainable future where vulnerable communities, particularly children and families in poverty, are protected and empowered to thrive.

As an elected member, you could consider:

- How is your council working with community organisations, schools, and families and involving children and young people to co-design climate initiatives that address local needs?
- What steps are being taken to ensure a just transition, protecting low-income families from the costs of climate action while maximising the benefits?

- How is the council engaging with local actors, such as Community Planning Partnerships, to address child poverty and climate change in an integrated way?

In conclusion, climate change and child poverty are deeply interconnected challenges that require integrated solutions. By aligning climate action with poverty reduction strategies, elected members can deliver co-benefits that improve the lives of children and families while advancing Scotland's net-zero goals. Local authorities have a unique opportunity to lead this effort by prioritising vulnerable communities, fostering collaboration, and ensuring that climate policies are designed with equity and inclusion at their core. Together, we can create a more resilient and equitable future for all.



Definitions

Absolute child poverty: Proportion of children living in households with equivalised incomes below 60% of the median UK income in 2010/11 adjusted for inflation.

Child poverty: Defined as children living in households with income below 60% of the median household income after housing costs. Child poverty is a multidimensional issue, affecting access to education, health, housing, and overall well-being.

Co-benefits: Positive outcomes that result from actions taken to address climate change. These actions provide an opportunity to deliver co-benefits for population health, wellbeing and equity which can also help alleviate child poverty.

Fuel poverty: More than 10% (20% for extreme fuel poverty) of net income is required to pay for their reasonable fuel needs after housing costs have been deducted.

Just transition: A framework that ensures the transition to a net-zero economy is fair and inclusive, protecting vulnerable communities, including children and families living in poverty, from adverse impacts.

Low income and material deprivation: Proportion of children in households with equivalised incomes below 70% of the median UK income and going without certain basic goods and services.

Persistent child poverty: Proportion of children who have lived in relative poverty in three or more of the last four years.

Relative child poverty: Proportion of children living in households with equivalised incomes below 60% of the median (middle) UK income in the current year.



Key organisations

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG): Provides resources and advocacy on child poverty issues, including the intersection with climate change.

Local Child Poverty Co-ordination Group (National Partners Group): Coordinate the effort and resources of national partners working to support local authorities and health boards in the development and implementation of their Local Child Poverty Action Reports.

Local Child Poverty Peer Support Network: is for local child poverty leads in health and local authority settings to come together and share policy and practice on child poverty locally.

Poverty Alliance: Works to tackle poverty in Scotland and can provide insights into how climate action can support poverty reduction.

Rural Child Poverty Network: The Network aims is to build and strengthen relationships between peers and colleagues working at local and national level to understand and address child poverty in remote, rural and island authorities.

Scottish Climate Intelligence Service (SCIS): Scotland's support programme for local authorities on area wide emissions and transition plans. Managed and delivered by the Improvement Service and the Edinburgh Climate Change Institute on behalf of Scottish Government and Local Government. SCIS provides data and tools that help local authorities assess the impact of climate policies on vulnerable communities.

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The logo for Improvement Service, featuring the lowercase letters 'is' in a dark blue font. The letter 'i' has a red dot above it, and the letter 's' has a red dot at the bottom right. Below the 'is' is the word 'improvement' in a dark blue font, followed by the word 'service' in a red font.
improvement **service**