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**ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE**

# Tackling Child Poverty: Learning from Local Child Poverty Action Reports



# Elected Members Briefing Series

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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 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](http://www.improvementservice.org.uk)

## About this briefing note

***“Scotland is at a crossroads and must decide whether it is willing to take the necessary steps to eradicate child poverty – there is surely only one option.” (IPPR 2024)***

Last year, Scotland made history as the first devolved nation to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law, requiring public authorities to uphold children’s rights, including the right to an adequate standard of living. According to the Verity House Agreement, child poverty is one of the top three priorities for local and national government in Scotland.

Despite these commitments, 1 in 4 children in Scotland live in poverty.

The purpose of this briefing is to enable elected members to:

- Understand child poverty nationally and locally, including which areas and households are at highest risk.
- Consider how their council and its community planning partners could take more preventative approach to child poverty while still meeting the needs of those currently experiencing hardship.
- Consider what progress on child poverty looks like in their local area and how they measure success.



# What is the issue and why does it matter?

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## Background

Approximately 1 in 4 children currently live in poverty in Scotland, putting them at increased risk of reduced attainment, poor mental and physical health and premature death.

While child poverty rates are much higher in some local authority areas than others, there is nowhere in Scotland completely free from child poverty. You can use this [interactive map](#) to get an impression of how child poverty rates vary within your local authority area. [It should be noted, however, that methodological limitations make comparisons over time difficult.]

In 2016, the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act, which set targets for a significant reduction in child poverty in Scotland by 2030. While progress has been made towards these targets, the Scottish Government is [not currently on track to achieve them](#). You can read the Scottish Government's current delivery plan [Best Start, Bright Futures](#) here.

While progress towards eradicating child poverty will require action at UK and Scotland level, there is also a significant role for local government. The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act requires local authorities and NHS boards to report annually on the action they are taking to contribute to a reduction in child poverty. These reports are called local child poverty action reports (LCPARs) and you can [read published LCPARs here](#). They highlight excellent work being done to impact the drivers of poverty reduction by:

- Increasing income from employment
- Increasing income from social security
- Reducing the cost of living

Many reports also highlight the work being done to promote the wellbeing and attainment of children in low-income families.

[Analysis of local child poverty](#) suggests that child poverty is increasingly being prioritised at local level and that local partners are taking an increasingly joined-up, strategic approach.

The same analysis also suggests ongoing difficulties for local government. These difficulties include:

- **The difficulty of taking a preventative approach** and investing in things like housing, transport and economic development in a way that benefits low-income families and prevents future poverty— while also continuing to respond to ‘crisis demand.’ Child Poverty is sometimes neglected, for instance, in local housing strategies and local development plans.
- **The need for long term investment and support:** Short-term, administratively burdensome funding makes it difficult to take a long-term preventative approach. It undermines investment in preventative approaches to housing, transport, and economic development, limiting support for low-income families and perpetuating future poverty. It forces responses to focus mainly on ‘crisis demand’
- **The difficulty of showing that local action is having an impact on child poverty.** It is very difficult to show the impact of local action on child poverty when many of the factors that affect it – such as the cost of living and entitlement to benefits - are beyond local control. Long-term local actions might take a long time to impact local child poverty measures, despite having a significant and immediate impact on the lives of children and families.

These difficulties matter because they can make it difficult for local government to get the recognition, support and investment they need to take long-term, holistic approaches to child poverty. This can leave elected members and officers feeling frustrated and locked in a continual cycle of crisis response.

## A. Taking a more preventative approach to child poverty

The need for – and financial benefits of – preventative approaches to child poverty are well established. According to the Scottish Government’s Public Sector Reform Strategy, for example, “the whole-system cost of poverty, including the increased public spending on health, education, criminal justice and housing that results from poverty, is projected to reach £11.1bn by 2035/36. Reducing overall poverty by a quarter...could avoid £2.9bn of public spend by 2035/36.”<sup>1</sup>

The difficulties associated with taking a more preventative approach, however, are also well documented. As far back as 2011, the [Christie Commission](#) noted that, “The reasons for the prevalence of reactive approaches to failure demand are complex, but include:

- resources are frequently occupied dealing with immediate problems, to the exclusion of longer-term initiatives.
- an unhelpful focus on short-term results, sometimes exacerbated by political demands; and
- organisations having an unduly narrow focus on specific outputs or outcomes.”

Elected members should consider the role they might play in identifying and challenging these barriers in their local area.

<sup>1</sup> [Scotland’s Public Service Reform Strategy: Delivering for Scotland - gov.scot](#)

Despite the difficulties listed above, Local Child Poverty Action Reports evidence more preventative approaches in the following areas:

### **Preventative approach: a willingness to consider a wider range of policy areas in work to tackle the three drivers of child poverty**

In relation to the policy levers being considered, it is increasingly common for policy areas such as economic development, housing and transport to be given a role of tackling child poverty.

Recent analysis highlights that “In relation to levers that might reduce socio-economic inequality at a preventative level (economic development, transport, planning and housing), the kind of policy levers being cited remains relatively consistent. However, **the focus on families with children and the priority groups has grown slightly sharper in some policy areas**, particularly in relation to housing. This is not the case in all areas and represents an ongoing area for improvement.”

#### **Example:North Ayrshire**

The council’s local child poverty action report highlights that it is undertaking a comprehensive review of its Housing Allocation Policy, with a particular focus on addressing child poverty. The strategy includes plans to build 1,625 new homes by 2028, ensuring energy efficiency and affordability to alleviate housing costs for low-income families.

#### **Example:Highland**

Highland’s local child poverty action report highlights that childcare is key to local economic development and a key driver for both reduced child poverty and a successful rural economy. As a result, Highland is looking to put a more sustainable childcare delivery model in place.

#### **Example: NHS Lanarkshire**

The NHS Lanarkshire Pulse Demonstrator Programme takes a preventative approach to child poverty by supporting parents aged 18+ to re-enter the workforce or upskill within the NHS. Aligned with the Scottish Government’s “No-One Left Behind” agenda, the programme offers paid placements, vocational training, and wraparound support tailored to individual needs, including flexible working hours to accommodate childcare. Participants gain experience in roles such as admin, catering, and healthcare support, while receiving guidance from job coaches and employability teams.

This is in contrast with the early years of local child poverty reporting when in many areas, the focus was more often on crisis response, food poverty and the cost of the school day.

It will be essential to maintain this shift going forward and consider how levers like planning and community wealth building can contribute towards opportunities for parents.

## Preventative approach: Ensuring services reach people sooner and meet needs before they escalate

Over the last few years there has been action taken across Scotland to make sure services – whether that’s family support, homelessness, employability or income maximisation advice – are joined up and as easy to access as possible. This has helped to ensure people don’t have to go ‘round the houses’ for the help and support they need. It should also mean families get the support they need before they reach crisis point, contributing to a preventative approach.

Investment in funds such as [Whole Family Wellbeing](#) and [Fairer Futures](#) Partnerships has accelerated some of this work. The particular focus on ‘priority group’ (those households with the highest risk of experiencing poverty) has also been useful to help support vulnerable households at the earliest opportunity. Households in the priority groups represent 90% of those experiencing child poverty in Scotland. They include:

- Households in which someone is disabled
- Households in which the mother is under 25
- Households in which there is a baby under age 1
- Households with 3 or more children
- Lone parent households
- Ethnic minority households

According to local child poverty leads, however, ongoing challenges – particularly for those areas that don’t receive additional Scottish Government funding - can include the lack of resources to ‘bridge’ the move from one way of working to the other, insecurity of funding and the difficulties of multi-agency working.

Elected members may wish to find out whether/how this shift to joined up service delivery is progressing in their local area.

### Local example: Edinburgh

Edinburgh Council’s report highlights a call to action from Edinburgh Poverty Commission that “ the design and delivery of a new operating model for all public services so that all public workers are focused and empowered to put prevention of poverty at the heart of everything they do”. The LCPAR goes on to detail that six projects have been funded through the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund to support the transformational change needed to reduce the need for crisis intervention and move towards prevention and early intervention.

## B. Addressing the difficulty of understanding impact

There is quite detailed information available on the location and depth of child poverty for some areas. This is helpful for providing an insight into where poverty is, but it doesn’t tell us much about whether local actions to address child poverty are effective.

Local action could take a long time to influence these figures and/or be diluted by the impact of policy or spending changes at national level. International conflict, COVID 19 and UK government spending decisions, for example, are all likely to have had an impact on local figures over the past few years.

As a result, there is a need to think about how else we can understand progress and impact at local level.

One way to do this might be to consider what can be measured at local level that common sense tells us will have an impact on child poverty in the longer term. This will include considering what will have the biggest impact on income from employment and social security and the cost of living for local families with children.

Depending on local priorities, these 'indicators' might include, for example:

- the number of low-income families accessing their free childcare entitlement (and therefore better placed to start work),
- the number of parents accessing quality employment through local employability services,
- the number of local employers paying the real living wage and offering flexibility, training and progression,
- the number of council and health board roles and progression opportunities taken by parents with children.
- the number of parents who have increased income from welfare/social security benefits following referral to welfare rights/financial advice from other parts of the system, including the health service

It is helpful to give particular consideration to the priority groups when developing such indicators.

Taken together, indicators of this kind can build a picture of the impact local action is having, even if local rates of child poverty are not yet coming down.

Data alone, however, will not paint a complete picture and it is essential to also consider the experience of frontline staff and households experiencing poverty.

## Perth and Kinross

Perth and Kinross's report identifies clear outcomes and details how success will be measured. It also includes baseline data and annual performance data which informs continual improvement.

For example, it is noted that there were 846 requests for assistance for support workers. In 132 cases support was not completed. This information has been used to identify barriers and improve practice. You can read more here: [Children's Scorecard | Glasgow Caledonian University | Scotland, UK](#)

Numerous local partners working together to impact the same indicators could also help achieve a more cohesive, joined-up approach.

The [Prioritise Child Poverty resource](#) is a practical tool to support strategic child poverty plans. It takes an outcome focussed approach making the best use of data evidence which planning, monitoring and evaluating local action on child poverty.

The views and experiences of local people are also a vital part of the picture. While case studies and personal testimonies can never tell the whole story, they are an important source of information about whether local action to tackle child poverty is having the desired impact.

Ensuring local services are codesigned by the people that use them is also an important part of taking a preventative approach, by ensuring the end user is considered from the beginning. The need to include those 'priority families' at increased risk of child poverty is particularly pressing. Lone parent households and those with disabled or particularly young children are likely to have significant caring and financial responsibilities which may create additional barriers to employment or even accessing advice/support services.

## South Ayrshire

South Ayrshire has been working with Public Health Scotland using their Prioritise Child Poverty Resource to develop an approach to identifying priorities and understanding progress and impact. In addition to using quantitative data this approach includes a focus on community engagement and qualitative feedback. This can enhance understanding of how interventions affect families, even if the direct impact is not fully quantifiable.



# What does this mean for elected members?

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Elected members can demonstrate strong political leadership to tackle child poverty. It will be beneficial for elected members to consider the need for joined-up, preventative approaches when developing policy and scrutinising action taken by the council and partners.

This will involve considering whether there is sufficient priority attached and investment in longer term interventions that will create high quality jobs, affordable homes and educational opportunities for low-income parents and their children.

Elected members should consider whether the needs of parents – and particularly those in the priority groups – are being considered in strategic planning and decision making relating to housing, economic development, health, education and transport.

This will include considering how low income families, including those in the priorities groups will be affected by wider spending decisions, increases in council tax and/or cuts to local services.

Elected members are also encouraged to consider information beyond the local child poverty rates when they are seeking to understand the impact the local authority is having on child poverty. This might include:

- Reviewing the use of outcomes and indicators in the local child poverty action report to tell the story of impact.
- Considering the voice of lived experience, whether that be elected members' constituents or case studies and testimony represented in council and third sector reports.
- The views of local officers working to address child poverty at local level.

Elected members are encouraged to champion a preventative approach to reducing child poverty, in line with the Christie Commission's recommendations. This means actively challenging the tendency to focus on short-term fixes and narrow performance targets, which often divert resources from long-term preventative solutions. Members should lead conversations with peers that promote collaborative, strategic action, ensuring that the drivers of child poverty are addressed not only in moments of crisis, but through sustained investment and reform. Those holding portfolio or senior roles (including those outside of their council roles eg. on NHS and third sector Boards) should consider how their remit can contribute to tackling the root causes of child poverty, rather than simply managing its symptoms.

Elected members have a key role in scrutinising local child poverty action reports. This is an opportunity to ensure a robust, long-term and preventative approach is being taken to tackling child poverty at local level.



# Further support and contacts

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For more information on the support and information available to local partners in producing Local Child Poverty Action Reports please contact:

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