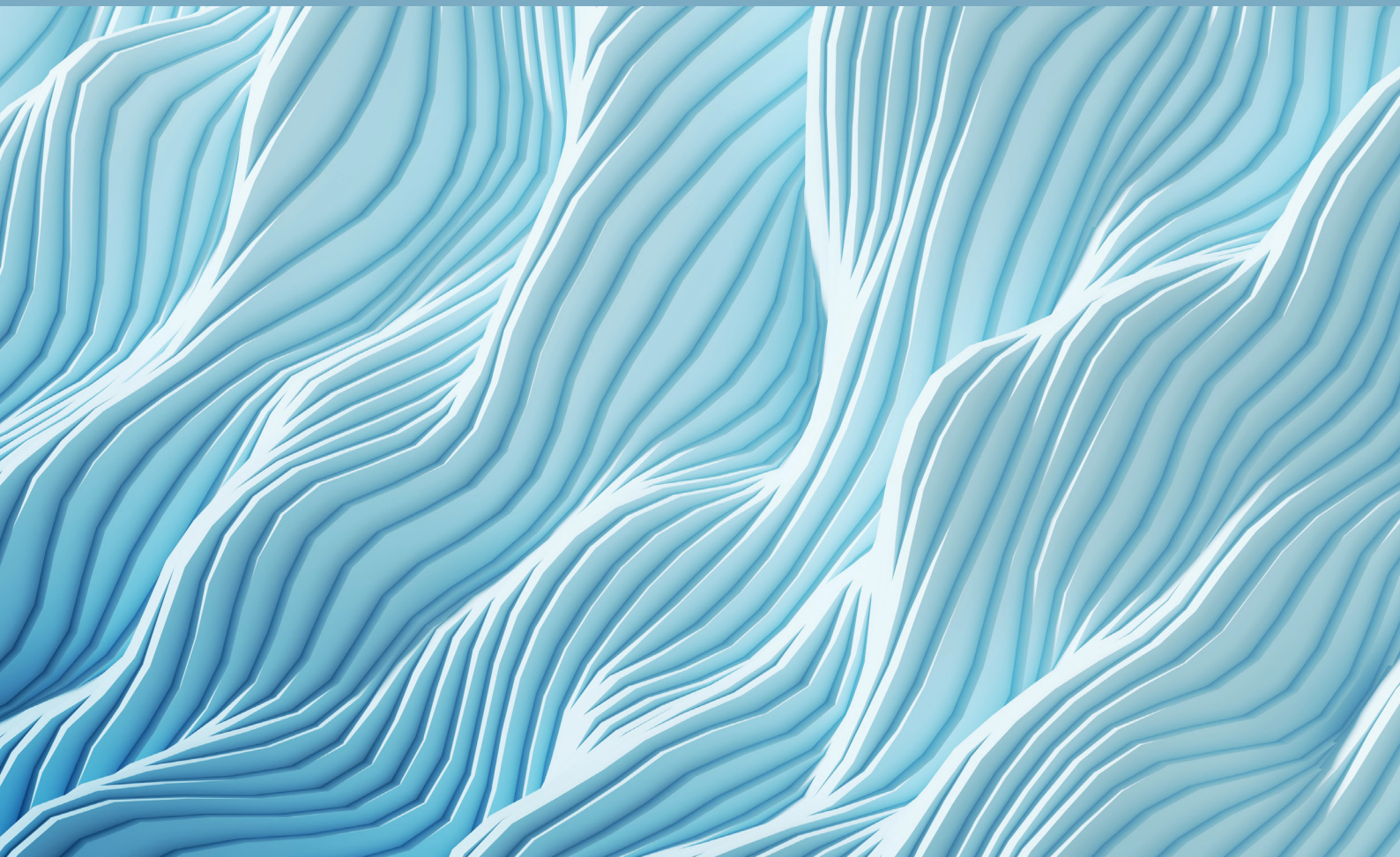




Public Service Reform in Action: Learning from Glasgow's Approach to Tackling Child Poverty



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Background and context in Glasgow

In their national report on transformation in councils, the [Accounts Commission \(2024\)](#) reported that “Transformation in local government has been happening for decades, but a step change is now urgently required...reform is vital and must happen at greater pace and scale. Not doing so puts the sustainability of vital public services at risk”. The Commission also noted that “Councils cannot deliver transformation alone and it is essential that the Scottish Government and Community Planning and third sector partners support the transformation of local services through more effective collaboration”.

[25,690 \(26%\)](#) of children in Glasgow are living in relative poverty.

The [Glasgow Child Poverty Programme](#) is a ten-year, city-wide public service reform initiative focused on reducing child and family poverty through systemic change. It emerged from lessons made in response to the Covid pandemic, work around the Glasgow Vision and early multi-agency collaboration. The Programme invests in dedicated change capacity and uses a hypothesis-led, data-driven approach to design and test small, evidence-based interventions, with the view to sustaining long-term change.

Since it was launched in 2022 as a [Pathfinder](#), the Programme has assembled a growing multi-disciplinary, multi-agency team who are developing transformational approaches to tackle child poverty that address system-wide barriers as well as the way that services are designed, developed and delivered for families.

Three overarching objectives for the Programme were identified from the outset and refined during the framing and delivery of the programme of work:

1. Demonstrate the benefits of a whole system approach - consistent with the Christie Principles - and foster change capacity across the multi-agency stakeholder team to work in new and transformational ways.
2. Harness learning and experience from the practical implementation of an ‘at scale’ exemplar of the No Wrong Door model to break down barriers, improve the way we work, and lay the groundwork for whole system change so that every citizen who needs it is able to access holistic, person-centred support regardless of where and how they engage across the public service system.
3. Make a meaningful, evaluable contribution to tackling child poverty in Glasgow.

The multi-agency team includes a broad range of partners, including: Glasgow City Council staff from transformation, financial inclusion, and child poverty teams; third sector partners, with Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector (GCVS) acting as an anchor point; academic partners from Glasgow University and Strathclyde University, linked to the Health Determinants Research Collaboration and research-practice collaboration; Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP); Department for Work and Pensions (DWP); and the Council’s Centre for Civic Innovation.

The Programme is structured around five core workstreams:

- ◆ **No Wrong Door:** focuses on creating seamless pathways so families can access holistic,

person-centred support regardless of where they enter the system, underpinned by a growing network of over 250 organisations.

- ◆ **Services and Campaigns:** deliver demonstrations of change in targeted booster wards, testing innovative interventions through a hypothesis-led approach that combines data, officer insight, and community voice.
- ◆ **Data:** builds and maintains the child poverty dashboard, secures data-sharing agreements, and uses intelligence to enable proactive outreach and measure impact.
- ◆ **Funding Flexibility and Procurement:** redesigns traditional processes to allow faster, place-based grants and collective commissioning, reducing delays and enabling early intervention.
- ◆ **Accountability and Culture:** embeds learning through gateway reviews and a performance framework that prioritises meaningful outcomes while fostering a collaborative, adaptive culture across organisations.

National policy context

The Scottish Government's [Public Service Reform Strategy](#) (2025) sets out the government's commitment to change its model of service delivery, particularly for people with the greatest disadvantage or most complex circumstances, to integrate support, and empower the front line to bring together all the resources people and families need to thrive. This approach builds on the lessons learnt from the pandemic and the way we worked together. Specifically, the [Covid Recovery Strategy](#) (2021) identified a number of practical issues including: lack of flexible funding; disproportionate reporting requirements; competing priorities; and barriers to data and intelligence sharing.

By supporting the Glasgow Child Poverty Programme, the Scottish Government is seeking to enable better integration of services at a local level and support the third sector to be a key delivery partner.

Aims of this briefing pack

This briefing pack has been developed by the Improvement Service, in partnership with the Programme and the Scottish Government. It has been developed through interviews with a range of Programme colleagues, and builds on existing learning already developed by/ for the Programme. These briefings are not a formal or independent evaluation of Glasgow's work, but are instead intended to directly share Glasgow's learning and experiences in their own words. Quotes provided throughout the briefing pack are anonymised excerpts from interviews with Programme/ Scottish Government colleagues.

The briefing pack contains:

- ◆ An executive summary
- ◆ Key learning from the Programme's work to date
- ◆ Learning from the key "game changers" for the Programme's public service reform work, including:
 - ▶ Community Planning, the Glasgow Community Plan and the Performance Framework
 - ▶ The Change Process and the Innovation and Learning Framework
 - ▶ Following the Evidence and Data Sharing
 - ▶ Culture, Multi-Agency Collaboration, Leadership and Learning
- ◆ An overview timeline and detailed timeline of the Programme's work, set in the wider local and national context

As well as being significant in the mission to reduce child poverty, the Programme is increasingly considered as an example of how to progress public service reform. It is not the only way and there is still much to achieve, but Glasgow's work provides a practical "in" to starting with an often complex and opaque ambition.

Glasgow's work also highlights the importance of taking a public service reform lens to child poverty, to better understand where broader systems change can support tackling child poverty. This briefing pack takes this lens, focusing on the opportunities and challenges of systems change work that aims to prioritise prevention, whole family support and an evidence-driven, place-based approach to improving outcomes. The learning is intended to be broadly applicable across broader public service reform work, and aims to:

- ◆ Provide an overview of the Programme's journey, focusing in particular on the enablers, barriers and the "how" of systems change work in pursuit of tackling systemic inequalities such as child poverty; and
- ◆ Contribute learning to how we can collectively approach public service reform in Scotland, understanding Glasgow's work as providing a practical "in" to the often complex and opaque ambitions of systems change and reform.

What key areas of work has the Programme focused on?

Shifting the strategic foundations: What do we need to do things differently?

- Influencing city-wide vision and priorities
- Shaping city's understanding of the "why" and "how" of reform
- Building on political and strategic leadership commitment, locally & nationally
- Developing levers for accountability & mechanisms for measuring impact
- Culture change
- Funding and reporting flexibility

Shifting ways of working: How can we do things differently?

- Building & following the evidence
- Taking an evidence-based, design-led approach to tackling challenges
- Engaging with communities to better understand their needs
- Multi-agency collaboration
- Investing in change & innovation capacity
- Embedding a learning culture in all that we do
- Adapting systemic processes (e.g., funding, procurement)

Shifting what we do: How can we support families better?

- Shaping holistic support and pathways for families
- Identifying ways to reach families earlier
- Testing approaches with communities to see what works and what doesn't

The “why” of reform for Glasgow

The “as is” system needs to change

The “as is” system needs to change if we are to improve outcomes for people, strengthen the financial sustainability of the public and third sectors, and bolster long-term community resilience. The current system is not working for people and communities, professionals, or the public and third sectors.

More of the same will not improve outcomes

Learning tells us that while we must continue to support families, we can't tackle child poverty more effectively until we have begun the systems change required. We must resist pressure for immediate delivery, outcomes and targets. This is “about what [families] tell us [needs changing within] the system”. Learning shows we need to move away from a purely reactive approach, so what does a more strategic response look like?: “What are we going to change? What's going to change about the way we work together?” However, this is a complex message to deliver when families are living in deep poverty, in-work poverty, and crisis, and there will be frustrations that resources are directed towards change capacity in a time of financial challenge.

No choice but to work differently

The financial sustainability of the public and third sectors remains under severe pressure. “We didn't solve [child poverty] when it felt like money was in a good place, so we're not going to solve it using the same approaches in a place where there's not ever increasing amounts of money.” “There is now no choice” but to work differently, applying this thinking across areas like social care, children's services, and employability.

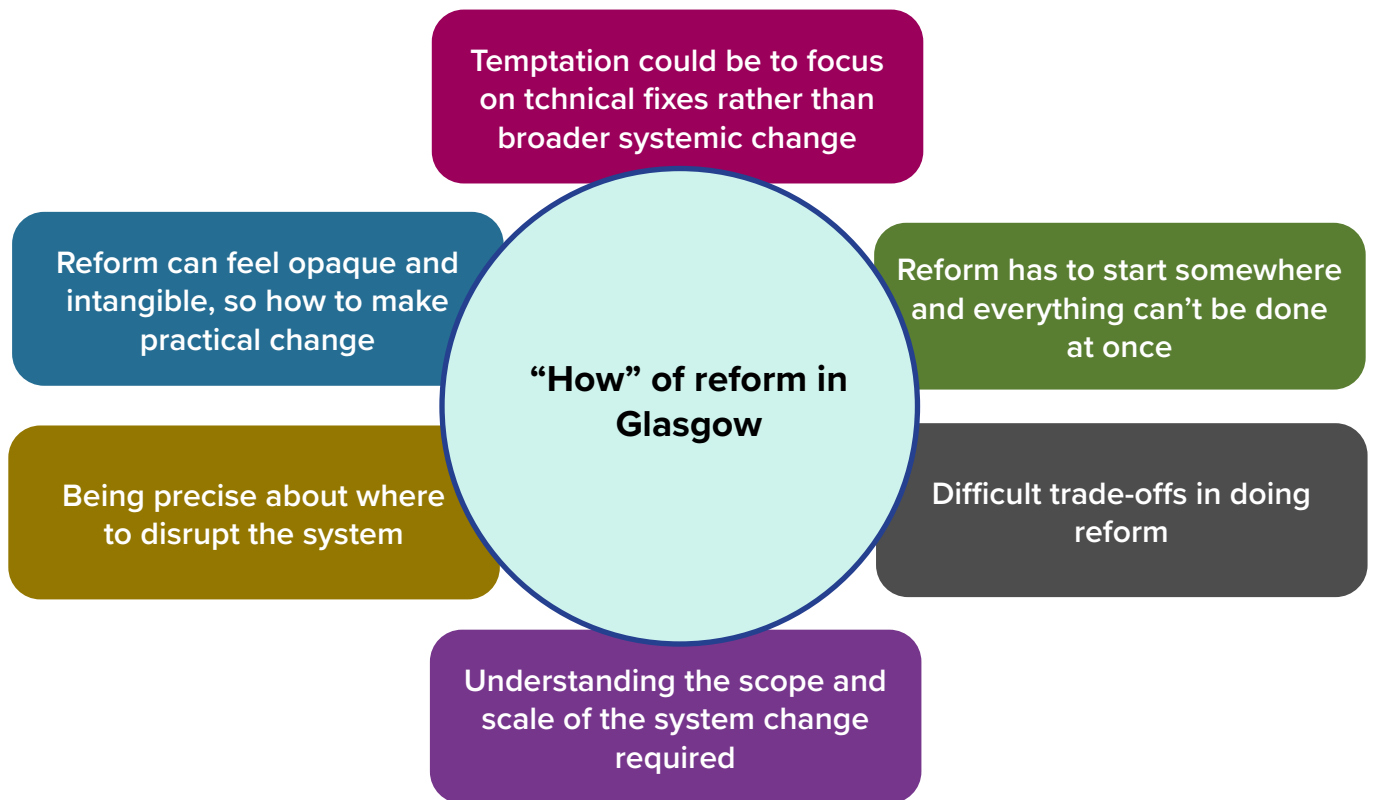
Prioritising prevention work will not happen organically

Prioritising prevention will not happen naturally or by itself; it needs to be deliberate.

Collaborative reform can be a platform for tackling structural inequalities

Focusing efforts on what systems change is needed to tackle a structural inequality like child poverty can help ensure that the methodology and learning could be applied across the system to tackle other structural inequalities, such as homelessness. There is a growing sense in Glasgow that collaborative reform can be a platform for tackling complex issues beyond child poverty.

The “how” of reform in Glasgow



- ◆ The “how” of doing systems change, public service reform and delivering Christie can often feel vague, opaque and intangible. There are often assumptions that everyone has the same understanding. There is little consensus on what public services will look like once they’ve been “reformed” and whether reform looks different for different services and communities.

“Pre-Covid, I was trying to deliver PSR and develop Christie principles, but it was kind of hard to actually understand that in practical terms. You know—about how you do that... it felt as though something happened during the pandemic that all of a sudden, because we’re “doing” the practice, then [it] starts just to make much more sense.”

- ◆ When we think about structural challenges, we often revert to looking for the technical “fixes” instead of the broader changes required, such as “adaptive leadership”. Even with Glasgow’s intent, focus and commitment to a “change programme and doing things differently,” translating that “commitment into concrete, coordinated action proved complex”, with a perpetual “gap between rhetoric and practice”.
- ◆ There is general consensus that this is the right thing to do, but getting started can be overwhelming. There is often limited understanding of the scale and scope of what this will entail. Glasgow’s work has focused on understanding what about the system needs to change and why, laying the groundwork for slowly baking change into the system. It’s about “navigating complexity and systemic abstraction and trying to make that more concrete”.
- ◆ This systems change work involves “listening to the system differently, analysing the system differently, and becoming much more precise about what the system is, what it is doing and being much more deliberate about the points of leverage”. This includes “creating the maximum intelligence that can tell us about where we should go in the system to disrupt it”. This also includes “trying to analyse all the time about who you’re bringing into the system...creating a consensus [and] trying to...make sure that everybody’s in it”—e.g., the Scottish Government, the Council, community planning, NHS, education, health, academia, etc.
- ◆ There are difficult trade-offs in public service reform. Change often requires stopping certain activities to free up resources for prioritised work. This demands courageous decision-making and supportive conditions for leaders, who must navigate the inevitable tensions and pushback that come with shifting priorities. In the current fiscal climate, this is especially relevant. This requires careful reflection on what public service reform means for an organisation’s specific context, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. Without this clarity, reform risks becoming an all-encompassing but ultimately vague ambition.
- ◆ The “as is” system will always find a way to adapt. Leaders are often rewarded for keeping the “as is” system continuing. “If we keep the system going...we self perpetuate...we get the same results”. Organisations may clearly acknowledge the need for reform, but there continues to be a question as to whether they truly understand the scope and scale of the change required.
- ◆ The consensus in Glasgow was the need to identify a key priority to focus on as a vehicle to bring about systems change. Reform has to start somewhere and it is not possible to do everything at once. Child poverty is a strong priority to coalesce around, given its national focus, the need for multi-agency working, its huge cost to the economy, and the growing body of evidence around prevalence and impact. Glasgow are not doing reform for its own sake, but rather to progress the clear ambition to reduce child poverty.

- ◆ There is a tendency to view systemic change as something external, something “out there” that needs fixing, rather than recognising that everyone involved is part of the system. Genuine reform requires self-awareness and a willingness to change one’s own practices and assumptions. Doing systems change work requires dismantling your view and changing the lens through which you understand the system: “You’ve just spent the bulk of [your work, your focus] in the wrong place, looking at the problem with the wrong lens”. This mindset shift is essential for meaningful transformation.

Ingredients for success for Glasgow's reform work



- ◆ Local political and official leadership's appetite to do things differently in the short and long term
- ◆ Sustained investment in change capacity, rather than adding systems change on to people's day jobs
- ◆ Engaging with different kinds of data and intelligence to develop a more robust understanding of the system and how to be precise with where to disrupt
- ◆ A willingness across governance structures to measure things differently, focusing on impact and outcomes, not outputs
- ◆ Developing a single, shared purpose—tackling child and family poverty—across the Programme, Council and key partners, reflected in key levers such as the Community Planning Partnership, the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan, the Performance Framework and the Public Service Reform Taskforce
- ◆ Seizing opportunities when they arise
- ◆ Creating time, space and change capacity to build relationships across the public and third sectors, attempting different ways of multi-agency working and collaboration, accepting this will be challenging and time consuming
- ◆ Drawing on multiple kinds of skills, expertise and knowledge
- ◆ A willingness to be uncomfortable, to not have the answers and to take learning from iterative hypothesis and testing approaches
- ◆ Willingness by parts of national government to work differently with local government, recognising their role as a partner rather than solely as a funder
- ◆ Funding flexibility

Challenges and barriers to Glasgow's reform work



- ◆ Precarity of slipping into ways of working that support the “as is” system
- ◆ Simplifying the complexity of this work for multiple audiences and communicating learning
- ◆ Articulating the work as systems change/ reform work rather than as a short-term intervention or service
- ◆ Evidencing progress and impact of work that does not fit neatly into short-term funding or political cycles
- ◆ Developing a clarity of vision and ambition for how the Programme operates
- ◆ Balancing innovation, flexibility and collaboration with governance, accountability, funding and programme management
- ◆ Balancing slow pace of systems change work with natural desire to immediately support families
- ◆ Losing focus and impact if trying to do everything
- ◆ New ways of working between local and national government not being structurally embedded going forward

Key highlights of the Programme's impact and "ripple effects"



- ◆ Streamlining strategic thinking towards a single priority for the Community Planning Partnership, Local Outcomes Improvement Plan and partners across the city
- ◆ Driving a shift towards evidence- and citizen-voice based decision making, strategically and politically
- ◆ Creating scalable and replicable ways for public and third sectors to work together differently
- ◆ Making tangible progress in data sharing/ use across public sector agencies
- ◆ Clarity of vision contributing to brave decision making at strategic and political levels
- ◆ Developing different model for how local and national government can work together
- ◆ Progressing different models that provide holistic support to families, such as Glasgow Helps and No Wrong Door

Useful links

Find out more about [the Programme](#)

[Glasgow's Child Poverty Reports](#)

[Pathfinder phase one evaluation report](#) and [phase two report](#)

[Pathfinder case study](#)

[Performance Framework case study](#)

Contact us

Improvement Service Team: psr@improvementservice.org.uk



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