

Thematic Learning from Fairer Futures Partnerships

2025/26, Q1 and Q2



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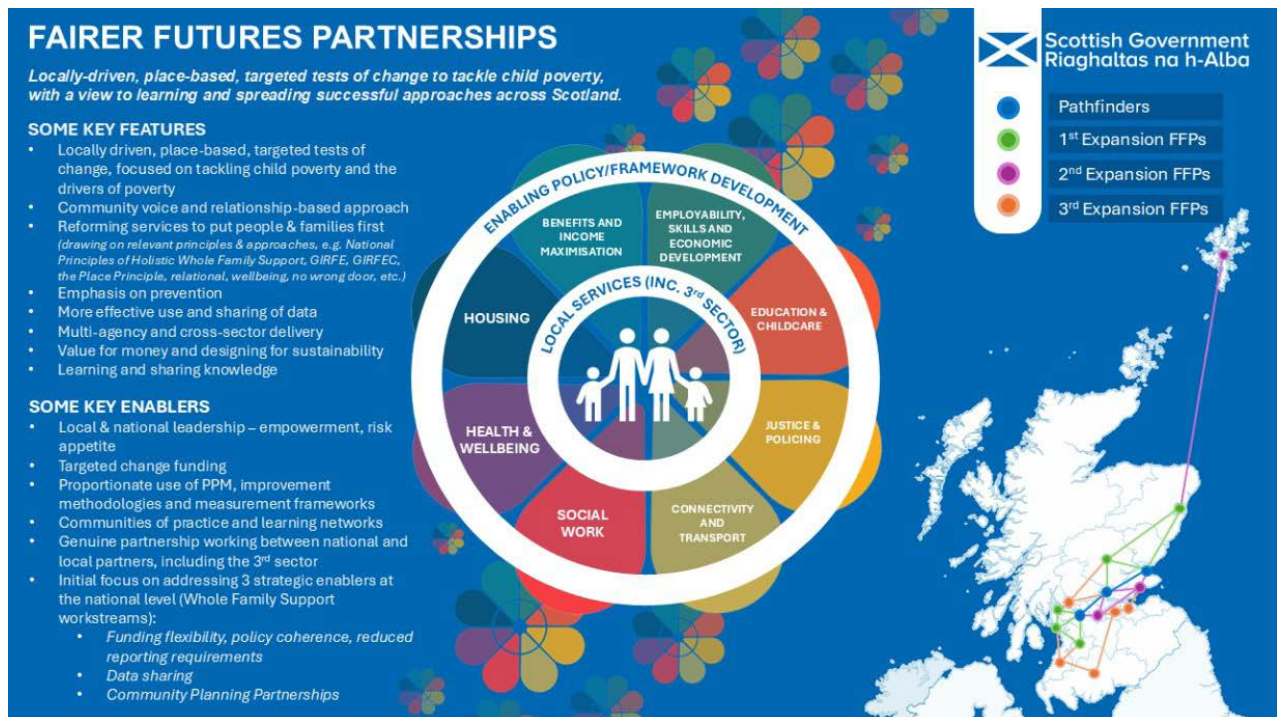
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Background and context

Fairer Futures Partnerships (FFPs) are locally driven, place-based, targeted tests of change to tackle child poverty, with a view to learning and spreading successful approaches across Scotland. There are now 16 FFPs across Scotland.



Aims of this report

FFPs currently provide reports to the Scottish Government every quarter, focusing on key progress, learning and challenges, drawing on qualitative and quantitative evidence and intelligence. FFPs also meet regularly with the Scottish Government, working in partnership to share learning, focusing particularly on what is needed from national government to create the conditions for successful and sustainable work locally.

The Improvement Service (IS) provides a range of opportunities to bring together FFPs to share learning and provide peer support. We have included learning in this report from sessions that, to date, have focused on governance, leadership and using data and telling stories.

Working in partnership with FFPs and the Scottish Government, the IS is developing bi-annual reports to collate this learning on an iterative and ongoing basis. These are not designed to be exhaustive or provide a detailed overview of each FFP's activity, but rather provide a snapshot of learning from the last few months. These short reports are designed to:

- Share learning around what's working well, and the barriers and enablers in terms of designing and delivering place-based, targeted tests of change;
- Share learning around what's supporting broader systems change work, and the key enablers, areas of progress and barriers FFPs are identifying;
- Share examples of good practice and celebrate successes;
- Make recommendations from FFPs' learning around what's needed to support sustainably progressing and embedding place-based approaches to tackling child poverty, wider systems change and public service reform; and
- Contribute learning to inform relevant work, such as whole family support, public service reform and tackling child poverty, across the Scottish Government, key national stakeholders and the range of community planning partners.

While the focus of all FFPs is to test place-based approaches to tackling child poverty, FFPs are taking different approaches based on local priorities, need and context. Some areas are focusing intensively on broader strategic systems change work; others are focusing on testing specific service delivery models that prioritise prevention, integrated support and community engagement; while others are progressing a mix of both. An [overview of each FFP approach](#) can be found here. Some FFPs will not have started to submit quarterly reports so their learning will be included in future synthesis reports.

FFPs are all at different stages with this work; some have been progressing for a number of years while others are just starting. The findings and learning in this report are not intended to compare local areas against each other, nor do we report on quantitative progress (e.g., numbers of families supported) as this is unhelpful without local context. Instead, the aim is

to understand key learning, themes and priorities across FFPs in relation to advancing and embedding place-based tests of change that tackle child poverty, and progressing wider systems change and public service reform through the lens of child poverty.

Audience

- All FFPs across Scotland, Adopt & Adapt partners, and other key community planning partners, including the third sector, focused on prevention, whole systems change and public service reform.
- The Scottish Government and Scottish Ministers, COSLA and key national partners with a role to play in supporting FFPs to sustainably embed their approaches.



Key learning

As well as being significant in the mission to eradicate child poverty, the variety of approaches adopted by FFPs are now being considered more generally as examples of how to progress public service reform. They are not the only way and there is still much to achieve, but they provide a practical “in” to starting with an often complex and opaque ambition. The work of the FFPs 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 report takes this lens. It focuses on learning from FFPs around some of the specifics of what works in tackling child poverty, but also 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.

Ingredients for success for FFPs



Leaders’ buy-in and commitment is crucial, as is leaders’ willingness to adopt different leadership approaches and the development of clear governance approaches.



Sustained investment in change capacity and sense making of the current system, rather than adding on this work to people’s day jobs, and a commitment to systematically embed a learning approach in this work.



Taking a joined-up approach across workstreams/policy areas that have alignment around the common goals of prevention, reform and systems change, highlighting that FFP work is supporting these existing, broader ambitions rather than being a standalone intervention/project.



Developing clear methodologies for approaching this work, including logic models, outcomes/evaluation frameworks, and identifying ways of sharing progress and impact.



Using data to be more precise about where to prioritise activity and focus.



Meaningful and robust power sharing with people with lived experience in service design and community-led solutions.



Collaboration and partnership working across community planning partners, particularly the third sector.



Ensuring services can take a flexible, adaptable and proactive approach to supporting families, and strengthening referral pathways across statutory and third sector services.



Supporting and training the workforce to strengthen resilience and empathy.

Challenges and barriers for FFPs



The complexity of the funding, policy and reporting landscape creates silos, competition, duplication, and confusion.



Balancing short-term national performance demands with the need for long-term transformational change, creating resource strain and conflicting priorities. Short-term priorities and targets can use a lot of management, project and information resource, leaving less available for the longer-term systems change work. Challenges around workforce capacity and wellbeing means it is often difficult to prioritise activity that supports prevention, systems change and reform work.



The complexity of the data landscape can be challenging, in terms of gathering and coordinating data collection across services, along with gaps in the data. But available, quantitative data also only tells part of the story.



Articulating the aims and ambitions of the FFP work within the broader narrative of systems change and public service reform.

Key recommendations based on learning so far



Simplifying the strategic landscape



Sustainability of change capacity



Continued support for FFPs to share learning and tell their story

The sections below provide more detail and insight into this thematic learning.

What's working well in terms of designing and delivering place-based, targeted tests of change, designed to tackle child poverty?



Using data to be more precise about where to focus activity

Embedding the voices of lived experience in service design

Collaboration and local partnership working, particularly with the third sector and independent learning partners

Supporting the workforce to strengthen resilience and empathy

Strengthening referral pathways across all partners

Capacity to take a flexible, adaptive and proactive approach to supporting families

Communication, outreach and engagement with partners and communities



Using data to be more precise about where to focus activity.

- Using data helped Dundee FFP identify potential reasons as to why a significantly lower number of families were presenting to services in one locality, and this allowed services to target active engagement with those families. Dundee highlighted the future potential value of being involved with [SAVVI \(Scalable Approach to Vulnerability via Interoperability\)](#) to enable more effective data sharing.
- North Ayrshire FFP has purchased a Smart Data Foundry licence to more accurately highlight areas for testing and tracking the impact of measures.



The voices of lived experience are recognised as a critical element to service design and decision making.

- North Ayrshire has developed two roles, designed to build relationships with families and deliver a peer-led element to the FFP programme, ensuring that families are supported by someone who has personally navigated similar challenges when experiencing poverty. They have also developed a test of change with their co-design group, where community members have engaged in many parts of the development and design process.
- Clackmannanshire has developed a Transformation Space, designed to strengthen citizen engagement in shaping council spending priorities and to put the [Christie principles](#) into practice.

- In Perth and Kinross, there is an “Engaging with Communities” transformation project running alongside the FFP, providing individuals with skills and confidence to build resilient communities. Perth and Kinross FFP are also bringing in specialist support for engagement with children in particular, and are looking to engage with the Improvement Service and SafeLives’ [Authentic Voice project](#).

Community members involved in North Ayrshire’s co-design process

“The decision-making model that we used should happen in every decision-making process.”

“It just makes sense. If you haven’t lived it, you can’t know what it’s like.”



Collaboration and local partnership working has been key. This includes engaging with partners and relevant teams as early as possible to build relationships and generate buy-in. Non-statutory partners, such as third sector and neutral learning partners, have been crucial in building positive relationships and trust across partners.

- Perth and Kinross FFP highlighted that very quickly their steering group members were identifying opportunities for closer working across services to deliver community support (e.g., discussions around large waste removal and availability of gardening equipment).
- East Ayrshire FFP highlighted how integrated support across housing, employability and childcare was improving outcomes, and that their partnerships with schools, NHS and third sector organisations were enhancing their FFP’s reach and impact.



Opportunities to support and train the workforce, such as through trauma-informed practice training and values-based leadership, are supporting the development of a more resilient and empathetic workforce.



Strong referral pathways are key, in particular ensuring that statutory partners, including schools, health visitors and the wider Council, understand the role of the FFP. Dundee highlighted that referral processes for employability support for a part of the local area are coming via the FFP. This means families are now being offered more in-depth, holistic whole family support, rather than only employability support.



The capacity to take a flexible, adaptive, and proactive approach to supporting families has ensured decreased barriers to access and supported engagement. East Ayrshire FFP highlighted that this approach and capacity enabled them to focus on ensuring that no families “fell through the cracks” during the summer period. East Ayrshire FFP highlighted that the independence of their third sector partners allowed them to take a more holistic approach, being able to act quickly, adapt to a family’s unique needs and deliver immediate relief to families. This has led to consistent

engagement and trusting relationships being developed with families, resulting in earlier intervention, more honest engagement and better outcomes for families.

The Zone – Young Mother’s Journey (East Ayrshire)

A single mother and her daughter with ADHD were supported through tenancy, education, childcare, and employment pathways.

“I didn’t know where to start, but I knew I could come to The Zone. You didn’t judge me—you just helped.”

“If The Zone hadn’t offered free childcare at BAP during the holidays, I wouldn’t have been able to go to work... It made all the difference.”

This support enabled the mother to begin SVQ training and secure a voluntary placement, while her daughter thrived in a specialist school setting.



Communication, outreach and engagement with partners and communities is key.

- Some FFPs highlighted the challenge in defining and communicating a compelling offer that resonates with local needs. Learning emphasises the need for clear messaging and comms about the FFP’s work.
- Some areas have used targeted engagement through initiatives such as uniform banks or ASN Stay and Play and Connect summer sessions (Inverclyde). Other areas have focused on developing locality-specific “What support can I access” resources (Aberdeen City), or recruiting key workers to support outreach and engagement in specific communities (Dundee). This helps identify key priorities/needs for local communities; for example, Inverclyde FFP has set up health and wellbeing initiatives such as oral health sessions promoting children’s dental hygiene, a community health and wellbeing peer support group, supported by a local GP, and has a new partnership with the Adult Learning team to support families with literacy, homework and cooking.
- North Ayrshire FFP highlighted the opportunity to frame community conversations around poverty through a strengths-based approach, e.g., “What do children and families in our area need to thrive?”.
- Shetland highlighted plans to deliver a workshop that will help develop a public and staff facing framing for the work.



Identifying opportunities to expand the reach and work of the FFP. This includes expanding to new localities, reaching new populations/communities and recruiting additional staff.

What are some of the barriers or challenges in designing and delivering place-based, targeted tests of change, designed to tackle child poverty?



The complexity of the data landscape

Recognition of the value of community-led activities is varied

Remunerating people for co-design and participation work can be complex

Workforce wellbeing and capacity needs to be prioritised



The complexity of the data landscape can be challenging, in terms of gathering and coordinating data collection across services, along with gaps in the data. Data also only tells part of the story; some families who need support may not be identified by available data (e.g., those with No Recourse to Public Funds), so other outreach activity and targeted support is necessary in order to reach families who would benefit from FFP support.



Recognition of the value of community-led activities is varied. One FFP highlighted 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.

“ Without the Brooksbank centre [Dundee], I don't know what this community would do. ”



Remunerating people for co-design and participation work can be complex. North Ayrshire FFP highlighted some members of their co-design group attended in a professional capacity and were paid to do so through their salaries, but others were volunteers and not paid for their time. Scottish Government guidance supported this process, but this challenge did impact group dynamics.



Workforce wellbeing and capacity needs to be prioritised. Staff across services and systems feel they are working beyond capacity and are often too busy delivering high-quality services to find time for cross-sector conversations. As a result, 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.

What's working well for FFPs' strategic systems change work?



Development of clear governance structures

Sense making and taking time to understand the wider system, locally and nationally

Leaders' buy-in and commitment, and openness to adopting different leadership styles

The ongoing value of political buy-in

Developing a clear methodology

Taking a joined-up approach across workstreams/policy areas that have alignment around the common goals of prevention, reform and systems change

A systematic approach to learning

Recognising the benefits of taking a place-based approach



Development of clear governance structures. Some FFPs developed new structures specifically focussed on the FFP approach, including steering groups/oversight boards, whereas in other areas FFPs are looking to make use of existing governance structures (e.g., Community Planning Partnerships, the Promise Board, etc). There is also a focus on streamlining governance arrangements.



Sense making and taking time to understand the wider system, locally and nationally. A number of FFPs highlighted the value of undertaking exploratory work to better understand the system. This includes gaining a better understanding of governance, funding flows and the commissioning landscape, and mapping services and community assets. This helps create a shared understanding of the wider system, including the kinds of power that different governance structures hold. This can help identify gaps, challenges and future priorities, and can support collaboration and relationships, which are vital for multi-agency partnership working.



Leaders' buy-in, commitment, and openness to adopting different leadership styles, is vital to progressing the work and supporting systems change. The importance of trust, relationships, and inclusive engagement were stressed as key assets.

- Leaders must create space for collaboration and encourage confidence in the full system not just individual teams. Leaders need to offer support to teams in recognising that achieving lasting change will take time. Failure should be accepted as part of growth.

- Responsibility needs to be 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 FFP highlighted a deliberate shift in leadership style - moving away from top-down approaches toward relational, preventative, and person-centred leadership. They highlighted their success was rooted in senior leadership giving permission and freedom for the team to be “radical”.
- One of the unique benefits of FFPs 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. Some areas said this had supported with difficult conversations around culture.
- Fife FFP highlighted that senior leadership’s willingness to engage with this work was “made possible through early relationship building and real buy-in to the work” as well as the “willingness of all involved to share information around data, funding, etc”.

“ 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. ”



The ongoing value of political buy-in. A number of FFPs highlighted that active involvement from political leaders was helping to shift dynamics and sustain momentum. North Ayrshire FFP noted the value of being part of a council administration led by Elected Members with a personal commitment to prioritise the eradication of child poverty. Several FFPs also highlighted the importance of raising awareness of their work with Elected Members, developing comms plans to strengthen understanding of how the FFP work supports wider business areas in the Council.



Developing a **clear methodology for the FFP’s work.** This includes exploratory phases to understand systems, and using this learning and evidence to develop key guiding structures and methodologies around the FFP, such as outcomes frameworks, evaluation frameworks and logic models. Aberdeen City FFP noted they were developing a methodology for deep dives to better understand multi-agency working.



Taking a joined-up approach across workstreams/policy areas that have alignment around the common goals of prevention, reform and systems change.

- Perth and Kinross FFP highlighted they have a Locality Lead who will work in tandem on the FFP and Engaging Communities Transformation Project (which provides individuals with skills and confidence to build resilient communities and supports staff to meaningfully engage with the public). This will help develop an

awareness of participatory budgeting, accessing funding, developing locality action plans and community wealth building assets. This will also help ensure the FFP is acting on learning from community engagement to drive the design of services, rather than the usual “service offer”.

- North Ayrshire FFP highlighted that they have agreement to combine child poverty, children’s services and children’s rights into one strategy and report, framing child poverty efforts in the context of United Nations Convention on Rights of a Child (UNCRC). They noted that leadership’s willingness to try a new approach has enabled this success.
- Clackmannanshire FFP has developed 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.
- Shetland highlighted they have “built great links with project delivery leads in relevant areas - e.g., children’s services and the CPP--which will enable [them] to intertwine this across the Council and NHS departments together with the third sector for maximum impact. People are valuing the space and time to have these discussions”.

“ There’s a shared feeling of wanting to join things up without adding extra layers or new initiatives. There’s a strong focus on alignment, seeing the FFP as a vehicle but one that is aligned with and can add momentum and resource to where people were already feeling they wanted to go. ”

“ 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 decision makers alongside people, facing staff and families, and building in time for learning. ”



A systematic approach to learning, even when “learning can feel like a barrier in the moment”. This could include ensuring time and capacity is built in for continuous learning through peer support with other FFPs, action learning sets and reflection.

- The learning sessions facilitated by the IS have supported FFPs to share learning and good practice.
- FFPs highlight the value of critical friends/learning partners, such as CELCIS and New Local, in supporting co-design and system mapping processes. Fife

highlighted the value of partnering with New Local to better develop a “shared understanding of [the] wider system”. These sessions have “built the foundation of good collaboration and relationships by being engaging, creative, leading to thought-provoking discussions and open reflection”.

- Some FFPs highlight that embedding learning processes within their FFP will be challenging, due to capacity and time for staff to engage.



Recognising the benefits of taking a place-based approach. Fife FFP highlighted the opportunities to bring together place leaders and service deliverers to be actively involved in co-creating this work. East Ayrshire FFP noted that having the third sector leading place-based approaches, in response to their knowledge of the area and feedback from families and communities, can build trust and enables earlier intervention.

What are some of the key barriers and challenges that FFPs are identifying in progressing strategic systems change work?



The complexity of the policy, funding and reporting landscape

Success for systems change lies with culture change

Balance of strategic systems change with service delivery and business as usual

The need to build capacity to think differently to enable long-term systems change

Articulating the aims and ambitions of the FFP work within the broader narrative of systems change and public service reform

Telling the story of change can be challenging, in terms of capacity and evidence



The complexity of the landscape in terms of services, policies, short-term funding streams and reporting requirements. There are many disjointed and overlapping funding streams and services including multiple tests of change, pilots or transformation projects, all targeting the same populations within one area. This can create confusion for colleagues and leaders so clear communication is needed at both strategic and operational levels. Public sector organisations are also bound by policies, legislation and budgets, which often restrict progress towards a whole systems approach. Several local areas are trying to streamline policy areas to improve alignment and reduce duplication but this can slow the pace of FFP work and highlights the tension between delivering within short-term funding cycles and the growing need for broader strategic alignment.



Success is often aligned to culture change, which is challenging and a long-term ambition. Some FFPs highlighted that the culture change in shifting to an enabling state can be challenging for professionals, as progress can be impacted by factors such as workloads and capacity, miscommunication and misunderstanding, and organisational policies and budgets. There is also complexity in teams/services feeling in “competition” with one another over similar policy areas, funding streams and intended outcomes.



Balance of strategic systems change with service delivery and business as usual. FFPs highlighted the need for dedicated change capacity to support strategic systems change work, as this can't be done as part of the “day job” of delivering crisis support. Some FFPs highlighted challenges around balancing short-term national performance demands with the need for long-term transformational change, creating resource strain

and conflicting priorities. Short-term priorities and targets can use a lot of management, project and information resource, leaving less available for the longer-term systems change work.

“The tension of performance management by service outputs vs system outcomes is also challenging when we are trying to build a narrative around changing that locally but it is still the overriding national focus.”



The need to build capacity to think differently to enable long-term systems change. This would support the development of leadership buy-in through providing space and time to step out of the “as is” system and service delivery to focus on what is needed to deliver systems change and reform. FFPs highlighted challenges in bringing the right people into the room with the required level of seniority and ability to influence change from across a variety of services.



Articulating the aims and ambitions of the FFP work within the broader narrative of systems change and public service reform. Evidencing the progress and impact of systems change is difficult because often the context in which we are working – through funding, culture and decision making – focuses on short-term service delivery, projects or initiatives, rather than transforming how the system works. The aim to change practice by putting people at the centre is becoming harder as financial pressures push organisations back to traditional ways of working. There is a need to show evidence of positive impact to keep stakeholders and decision makers engaged and maintain the narrative that this is about long-term change, not short-term interventions at crisis point.

“The capacity challenge will continue to be tricky, especially in the context of prioritisation. Hopefully this work will have a positive impact by driving preventative approaches, but it’s not immediate. People are under pressure - not just families but the system too, and it makes the shift from crisis to prevention and that future focus/sustainability tough.”



Telling the story of change can be challenging, in terms of capacity and evidence to do so. FFPs highlight that while case studies can demonstrate the complexity of families’ circumstances and the value of holistic support, these narratives do not fit easily into performance frameworks that prioritise quantitative data. This creates a challenge for evidencing impact of systems change work such as that of the FFPs. Case studies offer an alternative to quantitative metrics, but the challenge is in ensuring decision makers value qualitative data. FFPs highlighted the significant time and resource required in building strong evidence through case studies. This creates a challenge for scaling storytelling and embedding it as a routine part of systems change work.

Key recommendations based on learning so far



Simplifying the strategic landscape

National short-term funding for specific local tests of change, pilots and transformation projects focused on reform, innovation and systems change work are creating added complexity at a local level in terms of duplication, confusion, competition, and increased reporting demands. This means systems change work is siloed in itself and isn't joined up to be able to evidence cumulative impact. The complexity of this landscape needs to be simplified.



Sustainability of change capacity

There are continued questions around the long-term sustainability of the FFP work to ensure the learning, changes to service design and delivery, and wider systems change work are embedded going forward. This kind of work takes time to progress and requires sustained investment in change capacity. This systems change and reform work must be sustained over the long term, and the Scottish Government, funders and the full range of community planning partners must recognise the capacity and capabilities required to develop this work.



Continued support for FFPs to share learning and tell their story

Continued support is required to help FFPs develop the narrative and journey of their work—the why, what and how—in the context of systems change and reform work, so as to strengthen understanding that the FFP work is not a short-term initiative or pilot. FFPs highlight that we have a wealth of evidence around what works in supporting families—e.g., person centred, holistic approaches, etc—from multiple pilots and tests of change. However, FFPs (and beyond) need a stronger narrative that centres systems change as the work for all policy areas, and a collective and effective narrative that challenges the 'as is' system to prioritise outcomes, rather than funding and regulations.

Useful links and support for FFPs

- The IS provides a range of opportunities to share learning and good practice, and to come together for peer support. Reach out to us at psr@improvementservice.org.uk
- [Fairer Futures Partnerships: Learning, Engagement and Resources Space](#) – The IS and the Scottish Government have co-produced an online space for FFPs to share learning and resources. Spotlight Session Learning Reports can be found in the ‘FFP Learning and Engagement Event Outputs’ section.
- [Tackling Poverty Locally Online Directory](#) – The Tackling Poverty Locally Online Directory is managed by the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit (SPIRU) at Glasgow Caledonian University. The Directory profiles a wide range of local anti-poverty work being undertaken across Scotland and beyond.
- [PHS Prioritise Child Poverty Resource and Data Dashboard](#) – Public Health Scotland developed a Prioritise Child Poverty Resource for local authorities. They recently published the Child Poverty Data Dashboard within.
- [Collaborative Partnership East Lothian Case Study](#) – Whole Family Wellbeing Funding Programme East Lothian Collaborative Partnership Summary of Learning.

Contact us

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