



STRENGTHENING SCOTLAND'S APPROACH TO TACKLING POVERTY

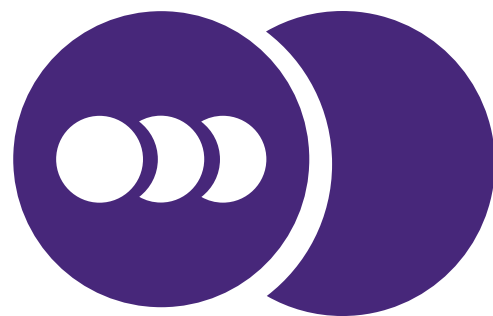


Strong communities start



with Local Government

FOREWORD



Far too many people across Scotland lack the access to, and sufficiency of, the resources, and supports they need to live well. Whilst we have seen reductions in Scotland's poverty rates, progress is tentative and fragile.

With almost one in four children still living in poverty and experiencing persistent inequalities - especially those disproportionately affecting women, lone parents, disabled households, single people, and minority communities - a renewed and rebalanced national approach is essential.

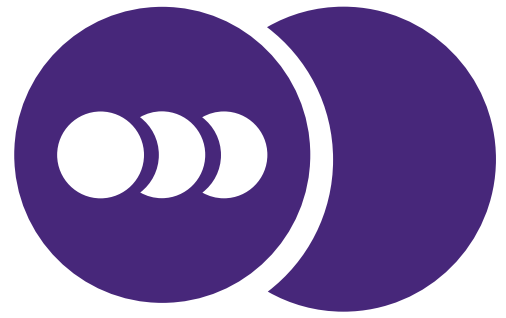
We have a significant opportunity to reshape Scotland's approach to tackling poverty and strengthen the foundations of a fairer future. Local Government, as the democratically elected tier closest to communities, has a central role in driving meaningful, preventative, place based change.

To grasp this opportunity and deliver long-term change, we need to see:

- A wider focus on how poverty affects families and communities
- Recalibrating the current slate of universal offers and a redirection of funding into preventative services in line with the principle of proportionate universalism. Providing everyone access to vital services combined with targeted support for those most in need to close persistent gaps in key outcomes.
- Greater emphasis on place and community in tackling poverty, bringing together local knowledge, national resources, and lived experience of poverty.
- Simplification of the planning and funding landscape for local partners
- Further alignment of work on tackling poverty within existing efforts to grow the economy and the just transition.

Everyday our councils, councillors, and local partners see the impact of hardship on individuals and across neighbourhoods—from rising housing costs, access to appropriate and permanent housing and transport barriers to in work poverty and food insecurity. Scotland now has an opportunity to shift decisively from mitigating poverty to preventing it, through investment, partnership, and systemic reform that empowers local leadership.

INTRODUCTION



Scotland's statutory commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2030, set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, continues to guide national policy. Evidence from the Scottish Government shows that 90% of children in poverty fit into six broad categories of family types. This analysis highlights that poverty is experienced within family systems and is shaped by interconnected drivers including employment, social security, and living costs.

At the same time, poverty in Scotland is both deepening and changing. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reports that *nearly one in ten people* now live in very deep poverty, and that *six in ten people in poverty live in working households*, including single adults, carers, and parents. This reinforces that poverty is not simply a labour market issue but a structural one—affecting people of all ages and household types and shaping the wellbeing of communities and local economies.

Every single day Scotland's local councillors, as the sphere of elected government closest to communities, witness the human impact of poverty on individuals, families, and neighbourhoods—from the stresses of insecure work and rising household bills to the stigma and isolation caused by hardship.

It is vital that we use this moment to refocus national and local efforts on prevention drawing on a wider range of services, support and programmes, while continuing to support essential mitigation. Working in partnership across public, private, and third sectors, Scotland can meet its ambitions for a fairer nation.

Each year, Council and their local partners produce a Local Child Poverty Action Report, setting out actions they are taking locally to support communities. Analysis of local child poverty action reports (LCPAR) continue to provide a valuable insight as they bring clarity and highlight the key role of Local Government in tackling poverty, working across national partners to provide further support to the development and implementation of local plans.



WHAT PEOPLE EXPERIENCING POVERTY TELL US



Financial strain is constant, overwhelming, and affects every part of life

Children and families describe daily trade-offs between heating, food, clothing, and participation in school or community life. Rising costs of energy, food, transport and digital access are among the most frequently cited stressors. This strain is further compounded by the prevalence of debt.



Stigma and shame are major barriers to seeking support

Many people, particularly young people, consistently report that poverty affects how they feel about themselves and their ability to engage in education, social activities, and friendships. Many describe avoiding school trips or extracurricular activities due to cost. Stigma contributes to isolation, reduces trust in public services, and can prevent people applying for the social security support they are entitled to.



Housing costs and quality significantly shape lived experience

Renters, especially those in private rented housing, report that high and unpredictable housing costs push them deeper into poverty. Poor-quality or insecure housing also affects health, wellbeing, and children's learning.



Work does not guarantee security

People repeatedly emphasise that insecure, low paid, or inflexible work — especially zero hours contracts — leaves them unable to plan financially or balance work with caring responsibilities. This includes single adults as much as families.



Disabled people and families with disabled members face additional pressures

Costs of disability, reduced ability to work, and barriers accessing social security mean that disabled households experience poverty at disproportionately high levels. People describe exhausting, complex assessment processes and insufficient support.



Transport, rurality and infrastructure critically affect opportunities

Young people in rural areas highlight limited public transport, digital exclusion, and long travel distances as barriers to education, work, and social participation.



People want support that is local, relational and dignified

Strong messages emphasise the value of trusted local organisations — including schools, youth work, third sector groups and community hubs — where people feel respected, listened to and supported without judgement. Many individuals feel statutory systems are transactional or inflexible.



WHAT WORKS ELSEWHERE



International evidence shows that population wide reductions in poverty are achievable when social, economic and community policies work together, particularly in countries with strong local delivery systems.

Nordic Countries: Universalism + local flexibility

Nordic states consistently rank among the highest globally in child wellbeing and lowest in severe deprivation due to strong universal social protection, paid parental leave, subsidised childcare, and income supports. Recent increases in low-income households highlight that universal measures alone are insufficient without proportionate universalism — scaling intensity for those at greatest risk. Inequalities persist where local municipalities lack the resources or powers to target support effectively.

OECD Evidence: Multi sector, long term approaches reduce poverty

Across OECD countries, sustained poverty reduction is linked to integrated economic, social and environmental policy packages, with strong alignment across spheres of government. Alongside this, long term investment in local services with clear, simple impact evaluation frameworks, demonstrate the benefits of preventative approaches.

Global evidence: Population wide reduction in poverty is possible

OECD and global poverty research demonstrates that poverty declines most rapidly where national and local governments align their objectives, resourcing and measurement frameworks. Investment that focuses on the early years, income security, and affordability of essential items, not only mitigates the effects of poverty but prevents future poverty and intergenerational cycles. Additionally, poverty is reduced when social security systems are both adequate and accessible.

Learning for Scotland

The evidence clearly show that communities see the greatest outcomes where national and Local Government work together on national policy which is shaped by local needs. This includes jointly agreed outcomes, planning, and resourcing to ensure the certainty required for successful preventative investment.

While strong universal entitlements are beneficial, this must be paired with the flexibility to provide additional support to those at the greatest risk of poverty and its effects. While universal entitlements can be national, Local Government and communities require the flexibility, empowerment and resources to identify and respond to need in their localities.

TACKLING THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES - NOW AND INTO THE FUTURE



Broadening The Focus Beyond Child Poverty to Family and Community Poverty

When we talk about child poverty, we are talking about children living in families and communities experiencing poverty. Free school meals, school clothing grants, youth work, and family support services all respond to needs that originate from shortfalls in family income, parental employment, social security adequacy, and the cost of living.

The evidence is clear that children's outcomes are tied to broader family and community level disadvantage—particularly women's poverty, lone parenthood, disability, social isolation, and low-paid work. National policy must therefore recognise that preventing child poverty

requires Whole Family Support, including single adults, young people transitioning to adulthood, and carers, as well as taking an explicitly gendered lens to decision making.

Local Government is best placed to identify the interconnected needs across our services, including education, childcare, housing, employability, public transport, and Community Learning and Development.

For more effective action, councils require national frameworks that enable long-term planning, integrated funding, and joint accountability. This would allow Local Government to build upon the vital local work to tackle poverty that takes place across Scotland every day:



Local authorities are playing a key role in tackling poverty delivering Free School Meals to 67.7% of eligible children last year, an increase from 64.3% in 2024. Highlighting the reach and effectiveness of supporting those most in need.



Uptake of funded Early Learning and Childcare among eligible two-year-olds reached 83% last year, reflecting the important role local authorities play supporting access for families in need. While progress has been good, Local Government remains committed to strengthening uptake and removing barriers to allow eligible families to access the offer.



The Scottish Welfare Fund, continuing to be delivered by local authorities despite increased demand and real-terms cuts to annual funding, remains a vital source of crisis support for families. In 2024-25, 36% of awards through the Fund went to households with children, with the most common items bought with grants listed by official statistics as food, essential heating costs, and household items such as beds and floor coverings. Real terms cuts to funding leave local authorities subsidising a national safety net through wider budgets, staff time and crisis support from elsewhere in the system.



Working with our partners across the housing sector, we have delivered over 28,000 new or refurbished affordable homes since 2021.



Local authority funded money and welfare rights advice services generated a financial gain for individuals of £381 million in 2023/24, as a result of an investment of £30.5 million. This represents a return on investment of £13 for every £1 spent.



Since the introduction of No One Left Behind, we have supported over 92,000 people across Scotland to improve their skills and confidence, with the vast majority of people entering a positive destination and almost 30,000 entering employment.



Ongoing work to progress the joint COSLA-Scottish Government 'Ending Destitution Together' Strategy focussed on supporting people living in Scotland who are at risk of destitution due to their immigration status under UK legislation. As part of this programme of work, Local Government has played a key role in supporting families with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) who face disproportionate risks of poverty across Scotland. A continued focus upon supporting people at risk of destitution is vital to ensuring Scotland remains a place of safety and welcome for all, irrespective of their immigration status.



Shifting Investment Toward Prevention and Proportionate Universalism

What Works Scotland has highlighted that local authorities have significant opportunities to identify and influence the early triggers of poverty—from pregnancy and early years through school and into adulthood. Preventative interventions such as income maximisation, accessible childcare, energy efficient housing, and reducing essential household costs are consistently found to be more effective and less expensive than later crisis mitigation. High quality education provision is a key term strategy with the preventative approach

to support improvement of social and economic outcomes of children and young people into adulthood.

Scottish Government modelling shows the significant impact that national policies such as the Scottish Child Payment have prevented approximately 100,000 children from falling into poverty. Building on this, continued focus is required to ensure, families, individuals and single adults can access support by addressing barriers such as language, literacy, digital exclusion, stigma, or complex application processes.



We have an opportunity to be sharper in our focus on those who need more support, through adopting a proportionate universalism approach – where we maintain universal services for all, while scaling the intensity of support in proportion to need so those at greatest risk receive more help, earlier and without stigma

Prevention and proportionate universalism are most effective where Local Government can

plan long term. Stable funding for workforce development and partnership working is essential to creating the capacity for local partners to deliver progress and achieve improved outcomes.

To address systematic barriers, and take a major step towards long-term poverty prevention, it is crucial that Local Government and Scottish Government should work together to:



Prioritise proportionate universalism, enabling universal local services—libraries, family hubs, community link workers, advice services, digital access—to tailor support at a scale appropriate to need.



Simplify and strengthen national entitlements, ensuring people can understand and access support easily.



Fund councils fairly and sustainably so they can invest in local income maximisation and advice programmes with partners to help households overcome barriers to claiming the support to which they are entitled – including language, literacy and IT barriers.



Recognising Place and Community as Central

Geographical disparities in poverty remain significant. Recent data produced by the [Improvement Service](#) shows that while many local authorities have seen improvements, some areas—particularly those with high housing costs, limited employment opportunities, or long-standing deprivation—continue to face entrenched poverty.

Put simply: poverty doesn't look the same in Lerwick as it does in Livingston.

Within local authority areas, disparities are also stark: rural communities face transport poverty and additional premiums on fuel; urban neighbourhoods may experience overcrowding and instability; and island communities face additional premiums that drive high living costs and limited local

labour markets.

Rural communities also experience hidden rural poverty, where hardships are masked by income-based measures because households face significantly higher costs which can include food, housing, digital, childcare and access to services. National policy design and funding based on urban cost assumptions risk missing people who are in genuine hardship.

Scotland's most effective anti poverty work happens when local knowledge, national resources, and community expertise – including people with lived and living experience of poverty - are brought together.

Safe, secure and affordable housing is fundamental to our work to tackle poverty. We need to accelerate partnership working to tackle the housing emergency to increase the supply of new affordable homes and bring down waiting lists.

To build upon existing successes and empower further local action to tackle poverty, action is required to:



Embed place-based flexibility in national strategies so councils can adapt delivery to local context.



Support strong local partnerships between public services, community organisations, and the third sector—recognising their trusted relationships with families and individuals.



Work with Local Government to accelerate the delivery of new affordable homes - COSLA recently published our [Tackling the Housing Emergency](#) white paper, which sets out the reforms we need to the Affordable Housing Supply Programme and our views on the proposed Housing Agency.



Enable councils to share, pool, and jointly deploy budgets with health, social care, and community planning partners to support integrated solutions.



Fulfilling The Purpose of Local Government: Funding and Reform

Local Government has statutory duties under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and the Community Empowerment Act 2015 to improve wellbeing and reduce inequalities. Councils are most effective when empowered to deliver integrated, place-based support that responds to local needs and the lived realities of the people they serve.

However, fragmented national planning and siloed reporting requirements—across education, health, poverty, employability,

social care, and community planning—makes it difficult for our councils to coordinate holistic support. Individuals, families, and single adults often navigate multiple systems with different criteria, deadlines, and definitions of need.

Whilst Local Government welcomes the principles of whole family support, this work needs to accelerate and move beyond pilots, path finders and early adopter programmes. We have evidence of what works – we need to use it to plan action and change.





Simplifying Planning and Funding

Evidence from children and young people shows that everyday costs—energy, food, clothing, school trips, equipment, transport, digital access—can significantly affect their ability to participate, learn, and thrive. These costs cross policy boundaries that currently sit in separate national funding streams.

Overcoming these barriers requires:



Streamlined planning and reporting across major policy areas, reducing duplication and contradiction. Using Local Child Poverty Action Reports as a vehicle to enable better alignment with other local planning and reporting duties and drive joined up approaches.



Scottish Government providing **multi year funding certainty** so councils can confidently invest in prevention.



Alignment of national performance frameworks with local outcomes to ensure flexibility rather than compliance driven processes.



Funding structures to recognise the needs of single adults, not only families with children, as poverty affects individuals at all stages of life, and any experience of poverty impacts community wellbeing.



Supporting young people into high quality education and training, education provision is a key term strategy with the preventative approach to support improvement of social and economic outcomes of children and young people into adulthood.



Working Together for Change

Local Government will continue to work together for change in tackling poverty, including through shared leadership and representation on the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Programme Board.





Aligning Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction

Low-paid, insecure work continues to drive poverty—even among full-time workers. Community Wealth Building principles offer practical routes for aligning local economic development with poverty reduction by supporting fair work, local procurement, social enterprises, and community owned assets. Local authorities, as major employers and anchor institutions, and through vital services such as welfare rights and income maximisation, have a powerful role in shaping inclusive local economies.



Delivering a Just Transition

As Scotland accelerates decarbonisation, UK-wide poverty strategies stress the need for policy design that supports individuals and families into flexible, secure green jobs while reducing essential costs such as energy and transport.

All spheres of government can support this by:



Aligning the Just Transition Plan with local employability and skills programmes.



Ensuring retraining opportunities are accessible to low-income parents, carers, young people, and single adults.



Investing in local low carbon infrastructure that reduces costs for households—e.g., energy efficient homes, local transport.



NEXT STEPS



Meaningful change requires collective action to:

1

Embed whole family and community centred approaches across all national poverty strategies.

2

Shift investment upstream, applying **proportionate universalism** and reducing reliance on short-term mitigation.

3

Reform planning and funding systems to enable integrated local delivery, with streamlined reporting aligned to outcomes.

4

Strengthen national–local partnership, ensuring Scottish Government and Local Government work together to facilitate the delivery of national policy that responds to local needs.

5

Align economic, climate, and social policies so individuals, parents, families, and communities—especially women—benefit from flexible, fair work within a Just Transition.

Together, these steps can move Scotland from mitigating poverty to preventing it—supporting thriving populations, with strong family and community support, and a fairer national future.

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