

SCOTTISH LEADERS FORUM ACTION GROUP ON CHILD POVERTY: COMMITMENT TO END CHILD POVERTY - A CALL TO ACTION FOR LEADERS IN SCOTLAND

Introduction

Tackling child poverty is a national mission for Scotland and one that all of us as public servants can do our part to influence. We must take action now or we risk not only missing the targets set by the Child Poverty Act, but consigning thousands of children to a life of poverty.

The challenges faced are not insurmountable, by prioritising child poverty together we can tackle these issues effectively and make lasting change. Our efforts must focus on preventing the root causes of child poverty, as well as mitigating the impact.

The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan highlights the need to increase household incomes and reduce costs, aligned with the [drivers of poverty reduction](#), alongside the need to support children and their families, which together will promote wellbeing and enhance the life chances of children and young people. If child poverty is really our priority, it needs to be meaningfully prioritised in all policy and expenditure thinking, so that the strategic and policy responses stand a genuine prospect of delivering our collective aim.

COVID has posed yet greater challenges to leaders' efforts to reduce child poverty. [Research](#) with local leaders, practitioners and partners has helped to identify the key elements of successful approaches to tackling child poverty in the face of COVID. We want to capture the best of our COVID responses; applying the learning at a local level from these experiences can inform future leadership decision-making processes, facilitate productive and adaptable partnerships, and strengthen effective support from national agencies. Our response needs to be commensurate with the scale of the challenge. This commitment to end child poverty draws on lessons for leaders from this research for the way ahead.

The COVID Recovery Strategy sets out a vision for recovery which tackles inequalities and calls for urgency and action across all of society to deliver the change needed. It is in this context that by working together with the same energy, imagination, and urgency as we approached the pandemic, we can achieve that change and drive a recovery that delivers for all of Scotland.

Time is short. For children, the time is now. To reach our national child poverty targets, the time to act is immediate; our leadership today will shape children's lives tomorrow, and our actions need to be immediately impactful in order to reach the child poverty targets we set for ourselves.

We ask that leaders join one another in making this commitment, embracing the values and ethos which will help us to deliver a fairer Scotland. Let's work together to end child poverty in Scotland.

Members of the SLF Action Group on Child Poverty

Our new call to action

Child poverty negatively impacts on the lives and outcomes of the children we have committed to protect. Its effects can be life-long, with experience of child poverty a key predictor of youth homelessness, and it can also result in people living much shorter lives and living in poorer health – with those from the most deprived parts of Scotland three times more likely to die before they are 25 than those from the least deprived and a 25 year gap in healthy life expectancy. Child poverty lies at the heart of other key challenges we face, including the poverty related attainment gap. The cost of child poverty in human lives and unfulfilled human potential is unthinkable, and we must do everything in our power to eradicate it now.

Whilst it is truly unacceptable that 240,000 children and young people in Scotland are brought up in poverty, we know that certain family types are at far greater risk. The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan identifies [six priority family types](#) – including lone parent households, those with a disabled person and those from a minority ethnic background – with the majority of children in poverty living in one of these household types. Our national commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals means we're determined especially to reach those "furthest behind, first". It is imperative then that our action and services are designed with these families in mind, ensuring that they are able to access and benefit from the support made available.

We can draw hope and inspiration from our collective response to the COVID pandemic, this has shown what we are able to do at pace and scale when we work together. There is also widespread enthusiasm for and commitment to taking action to address poverty across organisations and among front-line staff and service providers. As leaders we must help to maintain this enthusiasm and channel it into positive improvements which make a difference to the people we serve.

That is why the Scottish Leaders Forum (SLF) Action Group on Child Poverty have suggested a new '**commitment to end child poverty**' for Scottish leaders to sign up to, setting out three key actions all leaders should take to make the change needed. These focus on two key areas: changes in direct impact, and changes in processes that can result in more effective impact.

The calls to action are simple: however, delivering these in practice will be challenging and take real courage – we will all need to work together to challenge existing practice where it's lacking, and deliver the whole system change that is needed. The calls to action are summarised below and set out in greater detail later in this paper:

1. **Lead the change**, support the conditions and culture needed to tackle child poverty effectively;
2. **Focus on outcomes**, define and deliver programmes with a real potential to address the scale of the challenge, driven by the experiences and needs of the communities that services are intended to support;
3. **Take risks to innovate**, persist in the joint endeavour of making people-centred improvements stick.

The paper also sets out proposals for how we monitor the changes implemented, to reassure ourselves that they are making the difference needed.

Undoubtedly the child poverty targets are ambitious but with focused action across Scotland they can be achieved. This has been demonstrated in recent history. Between 1998 and 2010 reducing child poverty was made a priority in the UK - with a comprehensive strategy and focus on child poverty reduction - and the number of children in poverty in Scotland fell by 120,000 and across the UK by around 700,000. Moreover we know that child poverty levels have been significantly lower across the UK than they are today, and that they continue to be lower in other countries. Transformational change is needed, but if we all work together it can be achieved.

Whilst we could all argue that we are already taking forward action in line with these calls, demonstrated by our annual reports on child poverty, there is no doubt that we must do more.

Modelling shows we are not on track to meet the challenging targets set, and far greater action is needed to tackle child poverty – we must draw the maximum impact from every action taken and investment made.

We all need to re-examine our strategic approach to child poverty and see how we can identify better and more effective interventions that accelerate our progress. If child poverty really is a top priority, we cannot accept the status quo if it is clearly not delivering on our vision. New approaches, new policies and new services must be found.

As well as helping those in poverty now, we must work to address the root causes of poverty, directing greater resource and energy to prevent poverty and its negative impacts. Doing so is everyone's responsibility, including our own, and we must use our role as leaders to inspire action across Scotland. By ensuring our services are easy to access for the people who need them most, we will provide a stronger platform for tackling the root causes of poverty and rebuilding economic security. And - most importantly of all – in doing so we must be ambitious and listen.

The 'commitment to end child poverty' therefore focuses upon our role as leaders to demonstrate pro-active leadership to eliminate child poverty, to create the environment needed for change to become a reality, to establish and maintain a clear line of sight to people's experiences and outcomes in all we do, and to come together to challenge existing ways of working. Not every change implemented will achieve the anticipated outcome, but the risk of inaction is too great – we must strive to make the changes needed and to challenge established ways of working where these are not delivering for our communities and inhibit addressing child poverty.

This is reflected across the three actions set out below:

Action 1 – Lead the Change: Support the conditions and culture needed to tackle child poverty effectively

What are the hallmarks of success?

- Leaders, at all levels, actively encourage and drive forward action to tackle child poverty and improve public services.
- We empower people across Scotland to identify and drive forward the change needed.
- We ensure everyone works together to address the challenge we face, as we are more likely to succeed when we all work together, driven by shared values.
- We focus on doing the right thing for our communities and empower frontline staff to work with us to make the change needed a reality – valuing the work done at all levels in our organisations and better understanding how this contributes to overall outcomes.

What do we as Leaders need to do?

- **Proactively lead the change required.** Strengthen a culture that encourages innovative thinking and increase the behaviours that tackle child poverty effectively.
- **Proactively engage with staff, citizens and other local service providers who can contribute to the change.** Learn from what works, identify the critical strategic and delivery priorities where improvements are required and drive targeted and realistic delivery efforts judged to be sufficient to overcome these key challenges.
- **Encourage staff to take pride in work done well and ask them to share the lessons learned with partners and peers to enable practice to be adapted and improved across Scotland.** Identifying and distributing local practice examples should be supported by national partners, including the Scottish Government, Improvement Service and Public Health Scotland – ensuring that all areas can consider the learning of others.
- **Consider the contribution that our organisations can make to tackling child poverty and challenge ourselves to precisely identify and target the top priority interventions that are most necessary and most likely to deliver change on the required scale and within the urgent timescales.** We should implement the fundamental changes which will enable us to do more. Specify the action(s) and include plans to monitor progress and appraise staff and partners of how change is being implemented. Change should strengthen delivery of people-centred support to those who are currently experiencing poverty.
- **Grow opportunities for action to give voice to those with lived experience to understand what is needed and to inform improvements.** This will likely include speaking directly with families who move in and out of poverty, as well as those helping them. The Poverty Alliance’s [“In the room where it happens”](#) report offers helpful advice on different approaches. The Scottish Government should continue investment in the Poverty Alliance’s Get Heard Scotland campaign and the Poverty Truth Community, for example, to facilitate effective feedback loops directly into policy decision-making.

- **Put the appropriate governance in place, providing the strategic oversight and accountability necessary to drive forward action, and with the power to make the change required.** Revisit the strategic approach and priority interventions, if progress is seen to be too weak. Monitor and capture the change implemented as a result of this action, helping to ensure a joint endeavour of accountability and a responsibility for tackling child poverty across all of Scotland.
- **Examine our own organisations and how we can prevent child poverty through our decisions.** For example, ensure staff are receiving the Real Living Wage across all services, including care staff. Ensure flexible working is an option for the workforce, and avoid the use of zero hours contracts. Become Disability Aware providers. Take responsibility to pay equal pay for equal work, as a lack of equal pay, particularly for women working in caring roles, reduces incomes and is a poverty risk. Support good quality work opportunities by suppliers through careful procurement of goods and services processes.

Action 2 – Focus on outcomes: Define and deliver programmes with a real potential to address the scale of the challenge, driven by the experiences and needs of the communities that services are intended to support

What are the hallmarks of success?

- Leaders drive ambition, innovation and improvement by proactively engaging with local communities and working with them to design, improve and build to promote more effective responses in addressing child poverty – including with people who are experiencing poverty or at risk of poverty.
- Define and deliver programmes that have a real potential to reduce child poverty and deliver the urgently needed change.
- ‘Silo’ thinking and actions are effectively broken down, services are aligned so they meet the needs of the communities we serve, and achieve greater and better targeted impact than they would in isolation.
- There is greater coherence across services which ensure action is more responsive, effective and more sustainable in the long term.

What do we as Leaders need to do?

- **Challenge the boundaries of what is possible.** Encourage solution-focused and locally-led approaches to service delivery and identify barriers to progress.
- **Create and sustain strong effective partnerships between other organisations and sectors.** We will achieve more if we all work together.
- **Share responsibilities, resources and actions with partners to build a collective focus that harnesses the knowledge and capabilities of all partners.** Shared resources should include learning gathered directly from people using services and differentiated data to ensure support reaches those in need.

- **Form a coherent whole-of-society approach to meet demand through holistic and interlinked service delivery.** Disrespect existing boundaries where necessary to deliver person-centred services that meet people's whole range of needs, and a '*no wrong door*' approach. Which organisation is best placed to lead on action should be informed by people who use their services. In doing so leaders should support the move away from a siloed approach in terms of ownership, leadership, resource allocation and decision making.
- **Support the movement of necessary resources to facilitate the change needed.** Consider what intelligence is informing organisational decisions.
- **Learn from what works for people at risk of or experiencing poverty, and where improvements are required.** For example, make income maximisation support standard practice. And ensure that processes and eligibility are simple for recipients where support is targeted on the basis of low income or other criteria so that people aren't blocked or discouraged from getting the help they need. Support should also be provided in ways which promote individual agency, choice and dignity. There should, for example, be a default presumption toward cash rather than in-kind support.
- **Public services should work to understand what matters to people with lived experience through ongoing engagement and trust building.** As part of this, service design and evaluation should engage people with lived experience, focusing on a systematic approach to building person-centred services which address the needs they have identified, and engage proactively with their feedback - seeking to embed improvements, empower and give agency to those who use these services.
- **In our own organisations, ensure that there is sufficient support and signposting for staff to money and welfare advice, to ensure staff financial wellbeing.** We must lead from the front and set the standard for all organisations.

Action 3 – Take risks to innovate, and persist in the joint endeavour of making people-centred improvements stick

What are the hallmarks of success?

- We are driven by the potential to change things for the better and no longer accept that things 'are the way they are'.
- We take positive and balanced risks to drive forward progress.
- Tackling child poverty is a joint endeavour among partners working nationally, regionally and locally – including with the private sector.
- We take responsibility for owning the challenge of tackling child poverty in the spheres we serve, and commit to preventing, identifying and tackling barriers to change within the widest possible reach of our influence.

How can leaders support this change?

- **Engage with staff and give them the trust, freedom and responsibility for identifying and solving problems, ensuring that barriers beyond their control are raised to those with the power to change them - including barriers set in regulation.** Identify barriers to progress at all levels, and take action to ensure that systems work most effectively for the people who need them.

- **Give staff, including those engaged in front-line service delivery, the confidence and support to propose and deliver positive changes.** There should be a recognition that not all change will work first time, and that this may be an iterative process – where lessons are learned and services adapted gradually.
- **Clarify and embed the changes in practice identified during the COVID response that have brought significant improvements in the effectiveness of the delivery of services.** As an immediate step, changes in practice through the COVID response should be reviewed by Spring 2022, reflecting on improvements made as a result and which changes should be retained as a priority – for example where services have been streamlined or become more user focused. The implementation of new or revised practices should commence as soon as is practicable.
- **Persevere with creative solutions to stubborn problems.** This includes for example issues such as data sharing, or automation approaches to link data and systems to ensure that when a particular local benefit is applied for, the beneficiary will automatically receive another to which they are entitled. National and local partners should assume shared responsibility for working through how significant each challenge is, how potential risks can be managed to acceptable levels, the opportunity cost of not addressing this challenge, and taking concerted action to deliver against the most significant issues.
- **Where challenges are out with the hands of leaders, they should be raised with the relevant organisation.**

How can changes be implemented?

The cumulative impact of actions from organisations will be greater than any acting alone, the below is intended as a short checklist for Leaders to consider:

- **Be clear on the contribution your action will make to improving local outcomes,** including how it fits into the existing action set out in Local Child Poverty Action Reports and the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan;
- **Involve other agencies and organisations to develop and implement action** including enterprise agencies, local businesses, transport Scotland, third sector partners, local schools and colleges for example;
- **Seek help on planning and implementation where useful,** this may include from the likes of Scottish Government analytical services, Public Health Scotland, the Improvement Service, Local Government Digital service and others;
- **Agree and report on local reporting measures** – quantitative and qualitative - with local communities, business, delivery partners.

How can these changes be monitored?

Governance and oversight arrangements should monitor and capture change implemented as a result of this action, helping to ensure accountability and a responsibility for tackling child poverty across all of Scotland. Be clear about what actions are intended to achieve, and how they will address child poverty, to ensure these are impactful, specific and targeted actions. This evidence should urgently feed back into the (re)design of better policy, if progress is not fast enough.

People don't always know what actions are taking place to address poverty locally and how particular actions will impact on poverty. Discussion, engagement, evaluation, research, and training will contribute to ensuring people understand how their actions help to reduce child poverty, and this will in turn help them to contribute to identifying innovations, as well as monitoring the impact—or indeed, a lack of effective impact—of their actions.

Capture the key actions taken and the impact (*either anticipated or evidenced*) within annual reports on child poverty, and/or within other relevant reporting including against the Local Outcome Improvement Plan and Children's Services Plan as appropriate.

The Scottish Leaders Forum will meet to consider the value and success of these actions after 12 months, and what further action is needed.

Background to the Call for Action

The SLF Action Group

The SLF Action Group on Child Poverty was brought together in order to drive transformational whole system change on child poverty, informed by leaders from across the public and third sector, including Scottish Government, Public Health Scotland and COSLA.

Since late 2019 the Action Group have met, sharing experiences of the COVID-19 response and action on child poverty both during and prior to the pandemic. To better understand the key elements of a successful approach to tackle child poverty, the group commissioned [research](#) to explore this with local leaders, practitioners and partners across six representative local authority areas.

Whilst it is clear there is no single action, or magic bullet, that is capable of ending child poverty, the nationwide response to the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted what is possible when we focus our minds and work together to a common end. It has also thrown into even sharper focus the range of outstanding work already underway the length and breadth of the country – work that has stood firm in the most trying circumstances, flexed to meet changing needs and scaled up to meet unparalleled demand.

Child poverty is a wicked issue that damages the lives and outcomes of too many children in Scotland, it requires decisive action now and it will take all of us to make the change needed. By working together, across sectors and across boundaries, we can make a difference and we can reduce child poverty.

Our work as an action group has culminated in the development of this new 'commitment to end child poverty' - key actions that leaders and their organisations should take to address child poverty - endorsed by all group members.

The costs of poverty, why we also need to focus on root causes

Not only does poverty negatively impact on the lives and life chances of the children and young people we have committed to protect, considerable resource is spent each year dealing with its negative impacts.

Based on analysis from the [University of Loughborough](#), the cost of child poverty in Scotland was around £3.06 billion in 2021, with roughly half of this cost attributed to the lower productivity and higher unemployment levels of those who have grown up in poverty, and the remainder represented the impact on public expenditure in areas such as health, crime and education. Similarly the work of the Independent Care Review indicates the significant cost of system failure for adults having grown up with severe multiple deprivation – costs which are borne across a wide range of services.

To tackle poverty effectively we must focus on providing better services for those currently experiencing poverty as a stronger platform for tackling the root causes of poverty and rebuilding economic security.

Membership of the Action Group

Joint Chairs:

Jennifer Davidson, University of Strathclyde

Paul Johnston, Scottish Government

Current members:

Angela Leitch, Public Health Scotland

Andrew Goudie, University of Strathclyde

Andrew Kerr, Edinburgh Council

Andy Witty, Colleges Scotland,

Bill Scott, Poverty and Inequality Commission,

Celia Tennant, Inspiring Scotland,

Chris Birt, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Jim Savege, Aberdeenshire Council

John Dickie, Child Poverty Action Group

Kathryn Lindsay, Angus Council – representing Social Work Scotland

Linda Bauld, Scottish Government

John McKendrick, Glasgow Caledonian University

Martin Dorchester, Includem

Mary Glasgow, Children First

Nicola Dickie, COSLA

Peter Kelly, Poverty Alliance

Satwat Rehman, One Parent Families Scotland

Shirley Laing, Scottish Government

Past members:

Carol Tannahill, Scottish Government

Claire McPherson, Scottish Government

Gerry McLaughlin, NHS Health Scotland

Jane O'Donnell, COSLA

Jim McCormick, Joseph Rowntree Foundation