



Improving our understanding of child poverty in rural and island Scotland

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June 2022



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Executive Summary

What were we trying to find out?

This report has two aims:

1. To explore existing datasets and identify gaps in our understanding of trends and experiences of child poverty in rural and island communities.
2. To examine interventions employed in rural and island communities to tackle the causes of child poverty and support those experiencing child poverty.

What did we do?

We conducted a desk-based review of existing datasets and relevant reports. We interviewed a range of experts working on child poverty at national, regional and local levels. We also reviewed documents received via the project advisory group.

What did we learn?

Data and gaps in understanding

It is generally agreed that tackling generic or structural challenges associated with living in a rural or island community will help to alleviate child poverty in these areas. However, there are some key data and knowledge gaps that limit the extent to which local authority leads and partners can take effective action to support low-income families in rural and island communities.

These data gaps mostly relate to information at a sub-local authority level, including: eligibility and uptake of welfare benefits; cost of living; fuel poverty; uptake and provision of early learning and childcare; and the combined impact of employability and skills development initiatives. Importantly, more attention needs to be paid to lived experience data that can inform the design and delivery of effective support for rural and island children experiencing poverty.

Interventions to tackle the causes of child poverty and support families

A range of interventions exist to tackle the causes of child poverty and ensure families have the support they need. Interventions can be grouped around themes and tend to relate to: employment and skills development support; early years; cost of living; health and wellbeing; partnership working; digital technologies; school-based approaches; and strengthening the voices of children and families.

What do we recommend?

In relation to child poverty data collection and analysis

To address these data gaps and raise the profile of lived experience data, we make four recommendations to the Scottish Government focus on actions and outcomes that:

1. Recognise lived experiences as valid and important qualitative data for informing place-based decisions and actions in rural and island communities.
2. Support the Improvement Service to continue its work on sharing good practice, particularly in relation to local data analysis and other available evidence to inform action in rural and island communities.
3. Enable Public Health Scotland to support the roll out of the child poverty data source and associated workshops to all local authorities (in collaboration with the Improvement Service when implementing recommendation 2).
4. Use the child poverty action reports strategically to understand and share best practice and provide additional support to those local authorities with less capacity to undertake local level data collection and analysis.
5. Set up a Rural and Island Child Poverty Network (or similar) that places a strong emphasis on sharing knowledge and best practice between local leads (across sectors – health, education, transport, etc.), the Improvement Service, PHS, Social Security Scotland, SPIRU and other researchers.

In relation to interventions to tackle child poverty and support families

Based on the evidence reviewed in this report, we suggest that interventions to tackle child poverty in rural and island locations:

1. Recognise the higher costs of living experienced by families in these locations.
2. Recognise the higher costs of service delivery in these locations.
3. Are place-based and support mechanisms allow aspects to be community-led.
4. Strengthen cross-issue, cross-sectoral partnership working at national, regional and local levels to recognise the inter-related drivers of poverty which need to be tackled in a holistic way.
5. Ensure early intervention and a long-term approach as this is likely to be most effective (although we note this is challenging under single year financial allocations).
6. Place children and families at the centre of the intervention.
7. Explore digital technology as a delivery mechanism, though recognise that this might not always be appropriate.
8. Involve schools as key partners in local interventions.
9. Ensure that all interventions are rural and island proofed (i.e. checked to ensure that they are equally as appropriate in rural and island locations as they are in urban locations and if not that modifications/mitigations are made to design and/or delivery).

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References

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the project advisory group and representatives from the following organisations for either taking part in the interviews for this work or providing us with written information:

Child Poverty Action Group

COSLA

DEFRA

Highland Council

Highlands and Island Enterprise

Improvement Service

Mull and Iona Community Trust

Northern Alliance

Public Health Scotland

Scottish Borders Council

Scottish Government

Scottish Poverty and Inequality
Research Unit

Shetland Council

Transport Scotland

1 Introduction and policy context

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 sets out targets to reduce the number of children experiencing the effects of poverty. The Act requires Scottish Ministers to publish child poverty delivery plans at regular intervals, with annual reports to measure progress. Local authorities and health boards must also jointly publish annual reports on what they are doing to reduce child poverty in their area.

The first child poverty delivery plan, 'Every child, every chance' (Scottish Government, 2018a), noted several factors that add a rural dimension to poverty, and which may not be experienced by urban households. The cost of living, greater distance to services, the structure of rural employment and a lack of local childcare are mentioned as specific examples. The second child poverty delivery plan, 'Best Start, Bright Futures', was published in 2022 for the period 2022-26 (Scottish Government, 2022a). This research was completed before publication of the 2022-26 plan.

Purpose of this report

This report explores existing research on child poverty in rural and island communities to establish current knowledge on the topic and identify gaps in our understanding. It will:

- Identify key factors that cause and/or amplify child poverty in rural and island communities;
- Provide an overview of existing datasets that can be used to understand rural/island child poverty at regional and local scales;
- Highlight key gaps in our understanding of child poverty in rural and island communities; and
- Examine a range of interventions employed in rural and island communities to tackle the causes of child poverty and support those experiencing child poverty.

The report is based on an extensive desk-based review of academic research, other reports and available datasets, as well as a series of interviews with experts.

2 What is the issue?

It is estimated that 15% of rural residents in Scotland (170,000 people) are in relative poverty, compared to 20% (850,000) of urban residents. There are lower levels of child poverty in rural areas compared to urban areas, with 19% of rural children living in relative poverty, compared with 26% of urban children (Scottish Government, 2021a).

In an analysis of Scottish data collected in the Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK survey, poverty was found to be highest in large urban areas and lowest in remote towns, with remote rural areas tending to show higher rates of poverty than remote towns (Bailey et al, 2016).

Rural employment rates often compare favourably with urban areas, although it is well-known that rural incomes can be volatile and precarious, with unpredictable incomes from seasonal/casual work and zero-hours contracts characteristic not only of land-based and tourism employment but extending across many sectors of rural economies. Several research studies have reported the contribution to child poverty of several barriers to employment faced in rural and island areas by those with children. These include: “specific rural barriers such as greater distances to employment/childcare providers, limited access to social housing and more expensive transport costs.” (Glass, 2020, p7).

Nonetheless, where the head of household income is less than £170 per week the likelihood of poverty among rural households is significantly lower than in non-rural households where the head of household also has a low employment income (Wilson, 2016). This suggests alternative household income contributions in rural areas, perhaps other members of the household contributing to the household income ‘pot’ to a greater extent than their non-rural counterparts, sufficient to bring

Drivers of child poverty in rural and island contexts

Scottish Government (2018b) sets out three direct drivers of child poverty: income from employment, costs of living and income from social security/benefits in kind.

It is possible to identify key characteristics of rural and island life that may amplify these drivers (discussed in Scottish Government, 2021a; Shucksmith et al., 2022):

Income from work and earnings

- Volatile and unpredictable rural incomes.
- Limited access to training and skills development.
- Reliance on private vehicles.
- Lack of local and flexible childcare.
- Rural gender pay gap.

Costs of living

- Household energy costs can be unaffordable, with higher levels of fuel poverty in remote rural areas.
- Additional minimum living costs in remote rural areas (add 15-30%).
- Unaffordable housing and/or poor housing condition.

Income from social security

- Lower take-up of welfare support due to stigma, lack of awareness/support and challenges with the welfare system.

the total income above the poverty line. Rural incomes are also highly polarised, with the disparity between men's and women's earnings in rural areas greater than the national average (Scottish Government, 2018c; Atterton et al, 2019). Part-time work tends to be low paid and below workers' skill levels and qualifications, with under-employment and limited opportunities for career progression (McKendrick et al, 2011; Shucksmith et al, 2022).

This volatility of rural incomes presents a range of challenges for those who need to claim welfare support, including payment delays and overpayments, distances to travel for medical assessments and feelings of stigma (Shucksmith et al, 2022). These and other factors lead to lower claimant rates in rural areas.

A lack of local and flexible childcare is a well-documented barrier to rural parents looking for employment (particularly lone parents), which can make the cost of childcare unaffordable for those who find work (Glass et al, 2020; Scottish Government, 2021b). A lack of suitable childcare also creates segregation in rural communities in terms of how it affects opportunities, with those parents who are able to secure care more likely to remain in/re-enter the labour market. The Rural Lives study also reports that:

“Employment to suit school hours remains uncommon. This appears to make it more likely in rural areas that people with young families have multiple jobs so that parents can work at different times of the day to accommodate childcare and/or other caring needs.” (Shucksmith et al., 2021, p.9)

Other characteristics of rural and island life shape the experience of poverty in these communities and increase the likelihood of children experiencing the impacts of poverty (for an in-depth, critical review of evidence relating to children's experiences, see Glass et al., 2020).

Additional minimum living costs for households in remote rural Scotland typically add 15-30% to a household budget, compared with urban areas of the UK (Scottish Government, 2021c). Additional costs are even higher in some areas, with significant impacts on financial and psychological wellbeing in Shetland, for example (Stone and Hirsch, 2020). The costs of food and transport fuel are particularly high. Household energy costs can also be unaffordable: a third of households in remote rural areas were in extreme fuel poverty in 2019 compared to 11% of households in the rest of Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021a). Access to affordable and good quality housing is also a long-standing issue. All these issues contribute to the 'double disadvantage' of being on a low income in a rural area.

It is generally agreed that tackling generic or structural challenges associated with living in a rural or island community will help to alleviate child poverty in these areas (Glass et al, 2020). However, there is a need to take stock of existing data and other information about child poverty to develop policy interventions that will most

effectively meet the needs of children in Scotland's diverse rural and island communities.

3 Understanding the data - what do we already know?

3.1 Child poverty trends and high-level data sources

The four high-level child poverty targets set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 relate to the percentage of children in relative poverty, absolute poverty, low income and material deprivation, and persistent poverty after housing costs¹. Data for monitoring progress towards the national targets are derived from the UK-wide Family Resources² and Understanding Society³ surveys, which can only provide statistics at the Scotland level. National child poverty trends and progress are published annually by the Scottish Government, using these data sources⁴. The annual child poverty action reports report against the high-level targets at local authority level.

The Scottish Government's Local Child Poverty dashboard⁵ provides data available at local authority level, enabling analysis of trends at that scale. The dashboard contains a selection of indicators that do not measure child poverty directly, but they can be used to understand the local context and how it might be changing, as well as make comparisons between local authorities.

There is no annual, systematic review of child poverty statistics in rural and island communities, although a recent review of evidence compared the proportion of children in relative poverty after housing costs by urban/rural classification and looked at data related to children living in families with 'limited resources' (Scottish Government, 2021a). The limited resources measure identifies children in families that have both low income and cannot afford three or more things from a list of 22 basic necessities (Scottish Government, 2017). Figure 1 shows the percentage of children who live in families with limited resource by urban/rural classification⁶. Although helpful to gain a sense of the differences between rural and urban settings, these experimental statistics are only available at local authority level and use a slightly different measure of low income⁷ and a different material deprivation threshold to the national statistics.

¹ See <https://www.gov.scot/policies/poverty-and-social-justice/child-poverty/>

² See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/family-resources-survey—2>

³ See <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>

⁴ See <https://data.gov.scot/poverty/cpupdate.html>

⁵ See <https://www.gov.scot/publications/local-child-poverty-statistics-january-2022/>

⁶ Note that children are less likely than the Scottish average to live in families with limited resources if they live in an accessible rural area. They are slightly more likely to have limited resources if they live in a remote rural area.

⁷ Families are defined as on a 'low income' if the household income is below 70% of the Scottish median income after housing costs.

Figure 1: Percentage of children who live in families with limited resources by 3-fold urban rural classification, 2017-2019 (Scottish Government, 2019a)

	Before housing costs %	After housing costs %
Accessible rural	12.3	14.5
Remote rural	10.6	12.5
Urban	14.8	17.8
All areas	13.9	16.6

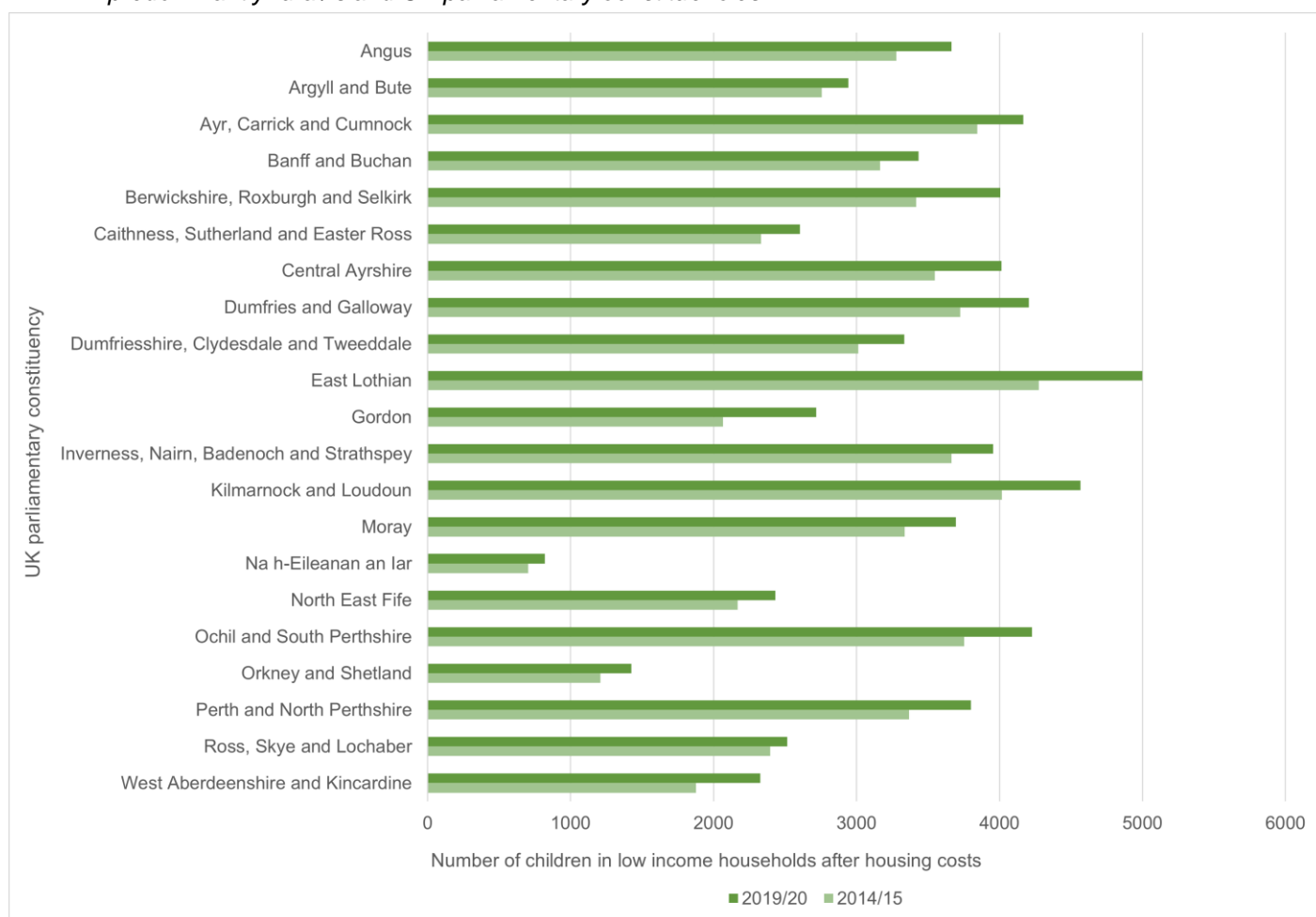
In March 2020, DWP and HMRC produced a helpful new set of indicators of child poverty⁸. These provide the most reliable indicator to date of local child poverty at both local authority and UK parliamentary constituency levels. However, the estimate of the percentage of children living in low-income households (with below 60% of the median income) is *before* housing costs (BHC) in this dataset. Therefore, these statistics do not consider differences in housing costs and can understate the impact of low incomes in areas where housing costs are high, as is the case for many rural areas (Thomson et al, 2014).

Analysis by Hirsch and Stone (2020) tackled this issue by combining the DWP/HMRC indicators with information about housing costs at the local level to estimate poverty rates *after* housing costs (AHC) – that is, how many children under the age of 16 are in households with incomes net of housing costs that are below 60% of the median. Combining Hirsch and Stone’s (2020) data with population tables from the 6-fold rural-urban classification (Scottish Government, 2018c), Figure 2 shows the trends in child poverty in predominantly rural/island UK parliamentary constituencies in Scotland. The figure shows an increasing trend in the number of low-income households after housing costs in *all* these regions between 2014/15 and 2019/20. The highest percentage point increase in this period was in Dumfries and Galloway (3.9%), with an average 2.9% increase across the constituencies in Figure 2.

These increases are similar to the national trend, which has been attributed to UK-wide policies set in place in the 2015 UK summer budget, which included an estimated £12 billion cut in working-age benefits, a four-year freeze in benefit values and the abolition of the ‘family element of tax credits and Universal Credit, which have reduced state support for parents significantly (Corlett, 2019).

⁸ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/children-in-low-income-families-local-area-statistics>

Figure 2: Estimates of the number of children in low-income households after housing costs in predominantly rural/island UK parliamentary constituencies*

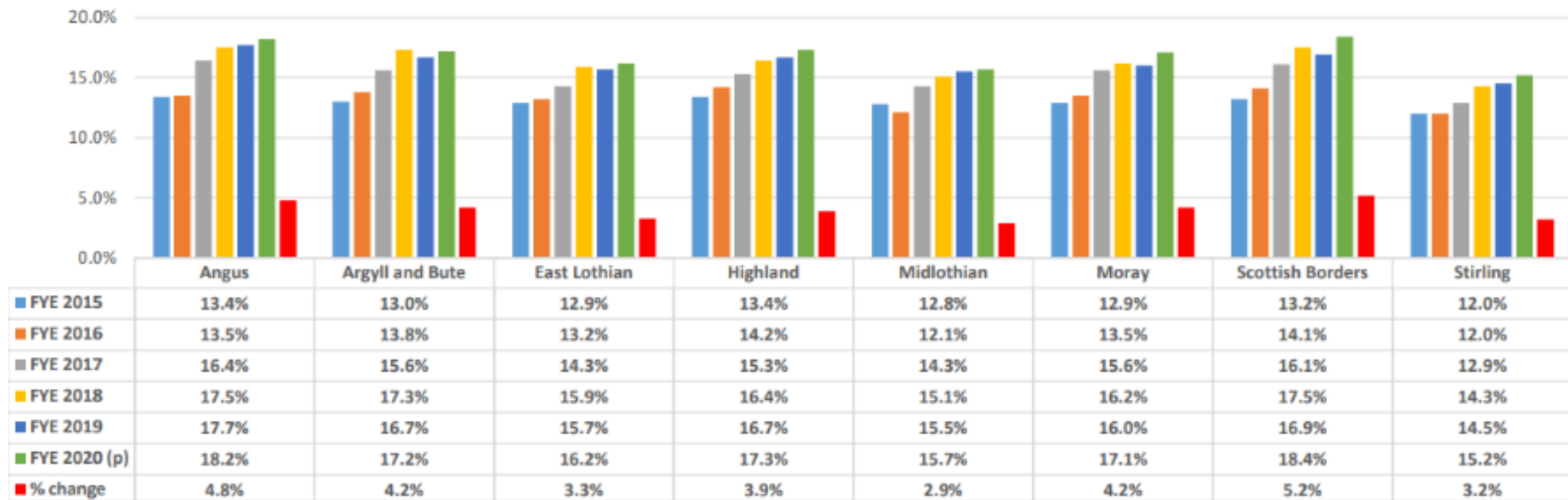


* At least 40% of the population in each of the UK parliamentary constituencies shown in Figure 2 live in either remote small towns, accessible rural areas or remote rural areas. Source data: Hirsch and Stone (2020) – using DWP/HMRC data - and Scottish Government 6-fold urban-rural classification (Scottish Government, 2018d). Note that the Isle of Arran is not included as it sits within the North Ayrshire and Arran constituency, which is predominantly urban.

Similar increases in the number of children in low-income households are documented in the annual child poverty action plans, although there is variance within the reports in terms of whether data are presented at local authority or smaller area level. The Scottish Borders Year 3 report confirms the trend shown in Figure 2, comparing annual changes in the percentage of children in relative low-income families with local authorities in its ‘family grouping’⁹ for children, social work and housing indicators. These annual trends are shown in Figure 3. Perth and Kinross Council has agreed 26 indicators to measure child poverty across the region, with data presented in the action report at local authority level. Annex 1 shows the data sources used by Perth and Kinross Council to examine change over time at local authority level.

⁹ Similar local authority areas based on the groupings set out by the Improvement Service: <https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/benchmarking/how-do-we-compare-councils>

Figure 3: Percentage of children living in relative low-income families in the Scottish Borders and Family Group, 2015-2020 (Source: Scottish Borders Council Year 3 Child Poverty Action Report 2021/22)



3.2 Local-level data

Gaining an understanding of child poverty below local authority level is important for targeting local action and resources efficiently. The national and regional/constituency trend data is useful for comparing change between areas and over time. However, local authorities and other organisations require local-level data to help them target support for children experiencing poverty.

The SIMD is a very sophisticated tool for identifying and targeting support for deprived areas and populations at the datazone level¹⁰. However, concerns have been repeatedly raised that these area-based measures may under-represent the experience of rural deprivation, despite improvements on previous indices (e.g. McKendrick et al, 2011; Skerratt and Woolvin, 2014; Gavin, 2021). This is particularly because the access domain of the SIMD receives insufficient weighting, failing to capture the frequency and cost of public transport in rural areas. Another key issue is that the measures do not detect people who experience deprivation but who do not live in deprived areas – deprivation is more widely dispersed in rural areas, in comparison with urban areas. These factors combine to make rural areas less likely to feature amongst those communities ranked as deprived, echoing several pieces of research that note the ‘hidden’ nature of rural poverty in generally affluent places (e.g. Shucksmith et al, 2022). Clelland and Hill (2019) note that if the qualitative experiences of deprivation in rural and urban areas are significantly different, it becomes difficult to make a judgement about the domains and indicators that are equally applicable to both. Therefore, SIMD needs to be used with local context taken into account (see the next section about lived experience data).

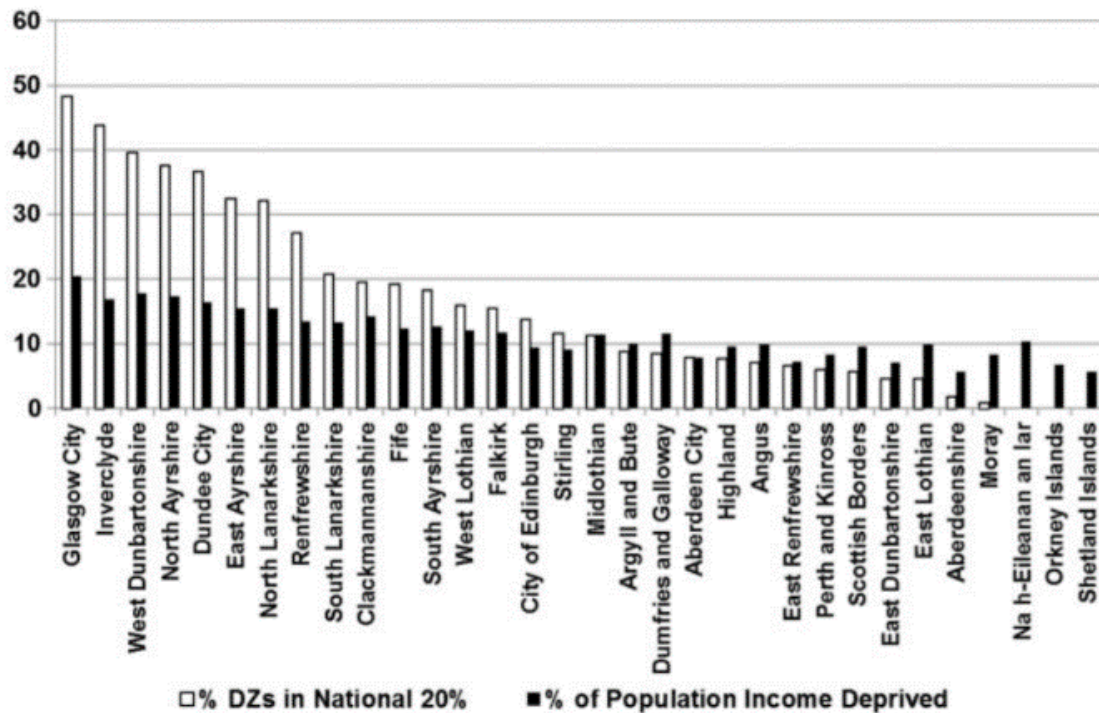
Although nearly half of the ‘most deprived’ areas¹¹ are in Glasgow, with none in the three island regions, rural datazones that have no or very few areas considered deprived in national terms have significant proportions of the population in income deprivation – see the right hand columns in Figure 3 - even if these levels are lower than the average (Clelland and Hill, 2019). Preliminary work in England by DEFRA¹² has also highlighted that the IMD (the English Index of Multiple Deprivation) cannot equitably identify the same proportions of low income in rural and urban areas, making the IMD unsuitable for targeting rural deprivation without re-standardising to separate out rural and urban areas.

¹⁰ Intended to be of similar population size, each containing between 500 and 1000 households, but range from small neighbourhoods in urban settings to large areas with low population density.

¹¹ The 20% nationally highest ranked datazones.

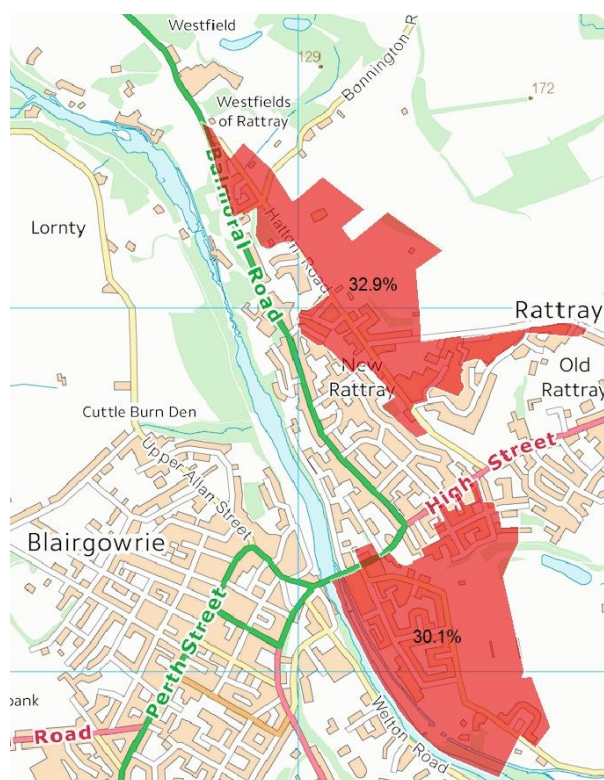
¹² Presentation by Alistair Edwardes ‘Targeting low income rural households with the IMD’ (DEFRA), shared with the research team. The work implies a need for rural and urban distinctions to policy.

Figure 3: Percentage of datazones in national quintile, % of individuals in income deprivation (Clelland and Hill, 2019)



Noting the challenges associated with applying the SIMD in rural areas, other sources of longitudinal microdata might provide more insight. However, a survey of local authorities' place-based interventions found that the majority still use the SIMD for at least partial (and sometimes the only) justification for targeting support in specific areas (Baczyk et al, 2016). Nonetheless, the SIMD *can* help in the development of place-based approaches, particularly when the domains are considered individually to reflect local and regional priorities, rather than as a weighted group. Mapping of income deprivation at datazone level in Perth and Kinross, for example, has allowed the Community Planning Partnership to understand differences between areas when targeting support (see Figure 4). A very helpful application of SIMD has been in rural Dumfries and Galloway to inform the region's poverty strategy. The analysis found that people experiencing income deprivation are spread across the region: 80% of people on low incomes live outside the most deprived places (see Scottish Government, 2020, for a summary and Hill and Clelland, 2015, for the full report).

Figure 4: An example of datazone level mapping in the East Perthshire CPP Locality Plan (2015)



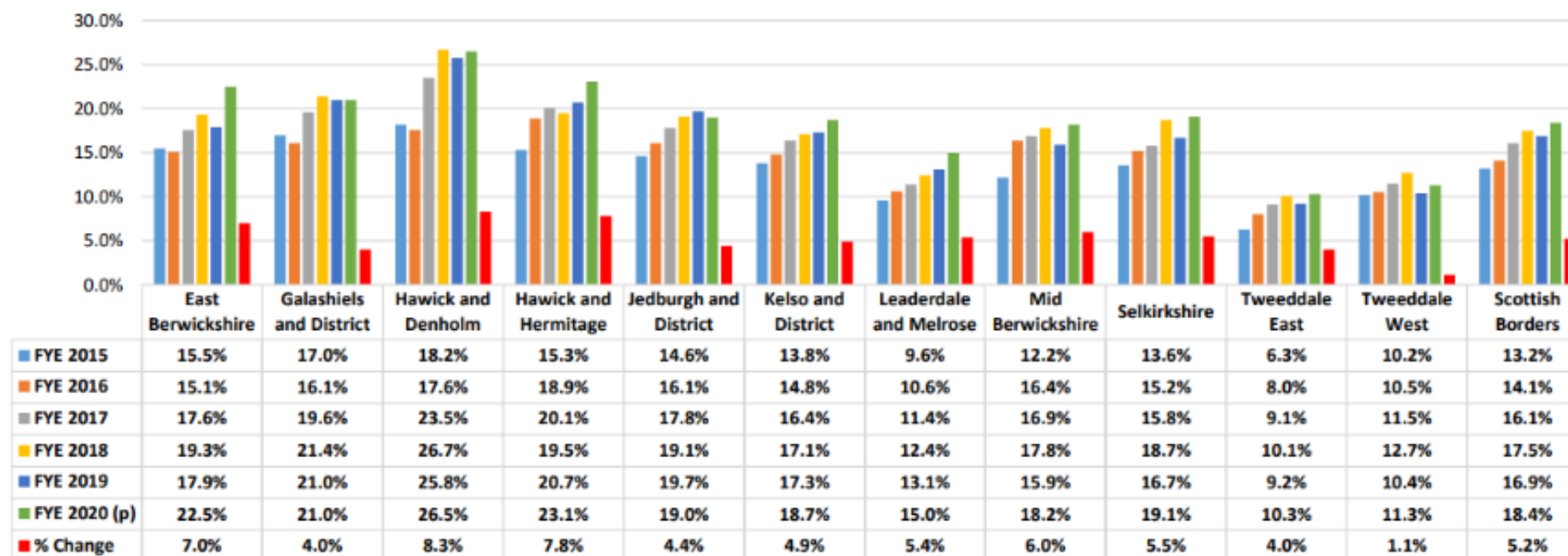
While this approach is helpful for developing relative rankings for different areas, it does not identify the absolute number of deprived individuals in each area or the extent to which deprived individuals are concentrated into deprived areas. In work in Argyll and Bute (Bailey et al., 2004), none of the wards in the region were found to be in the most deprived decile for Scotland but six appear in the second decile and three in the third decile (and the most deprived are mainly in larger, urban centres). In this case, wards did not appear to be a useful basis on which to identify areas in need of special interventions such as area-based initiatives as, even in the most deprived ward, only one in four people is regarded as income deprived. Even at the scale of output areas, the most deprived output areas still contain only a minority of individuals regarded as income deprived. Targeting the *areas* identified as poorest missed 86% of *people* below the poverty line.

This targeting of places has become more common following the requirements for Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and the development of Locality Plans, and data from the individual domains of the SIMD can help this approach. With the above challenges in mind, local authorities are increasingly taking more strategic interventions to identify households within the child poverty priority groups¹³, supporting them to enter the labour market.

¹³ The priority groups in Scotland are: lone-parent families; a household where someone is disabled; families with three or more children; minority ethnic families; families with a child under one year old; and families where the mother is under 25 years of age.

Recognising the importance of a local-level understanding of child poverty, some of the child poverty action plans include data at ward level to inform understanding of where to prioritise resources and of changes in data over time. Of the predominantly rural local authorities that have published a Year 3 child poverty action plan (2021/22), Scottish Borders Council has published trends at a smaller scale, with that data once again painting a similar picture of increases in relative low-income in all wards (see Figure 5). Other rural/island local authorities that have published Year 3 reports – Angus, Argyll & Bute, and Orkney - have considered local authority level data only. The Argyll & Bute report notes challenges of island life, including food insecurity, access to employment, loneliness among young people, and higher food costs¹⁴.

Figure 5: Percentage of children living in relative low-income families in the Scottish Borders and wards, 2015-2020 (Source: Scottish Borders Council Year 3 Child Poverty Action Report 2021/22)



¹⁴ All considered in the context of previous and ongoing work in relation to the National Islands Plan and the [National Islands Plan Survey](#).

Trend data by ward is available in some of the Year 2 child poverty action reports to describe the number and/or percentage of children living in relative low-income families, including Aberdeenshire and Dumfries & Galloway. Other local authorities have focussed on local authority/UK parliamentary constituency data on relative low-income households. However, using low income as an indicator of child poverty can also be challenging in rural areas because of the considerable variation in living costs (Glass et al., 2020). It should be noted that the Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit at Glasgow Caledonian University is currently conducting a systematic review of all the child poverty action reports and this work will consider the extent to which national priorities are being implemented locally¹⁵.

Public Health Scotland (PHS) recently conducted a pilot project with Inverclyde Council to identify available local datasets that can help local authorities and partners implement local actions targeted at the priority groups (see the Box below). The data sources identified in the work can be used alongside the local child poverty dashboard to inform local actions targeted at the priority groups¹⁶.

¹⁵ The lead contact for this work is Prof John McKendrick.

¹⁶ See a short animation about the project [here](#).

Case study

Child Poverty Data Source (Public Health Scotland)

This pilot project, co-produced with Inverclyde Council, used a public health needs assessment approach to build a better picture of what the local child poverty support 'system' looks like in Inverclyde. The project identified available local level data and how this could be used more effectively to shape local child poverty priorities.

The project focused on:

- mapping local services that low-income families might use;
- understanding the experience of the journey through those services and what families might need from them; and
- the data those services collect about families.

The project used participatory workshops with stakeholders to understand the journey of a fictional low-income family through the support system, and the pathways between services. This allowed the development of system maps and the identification of knowledge and data gaps.

Based on the themes identified at the workshops, they developed a 'child poverty data source' that provides a 'go-to' source of information about a range of local and national sources of data that local authorities and partners can use to understand child poverty in their region.

For more information, see: [Prioritise child poverty: a data and systems approach \(Public Health Scotland, 2021\)](#)

The resulting 'child poverty data source' provides a comprehensive overview of all the datasets available to local authorities developing policies and actions related to child poverty (see Annex 2 for a full list). The data source predominantly notes information from a few key providers, including: the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, Annual Population Survey, DWP, HMRC, Scottish Government, Scottish Social Security Agency, Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Housing Regulator. The accompanying spreadsheet is organised by population profile (and divided into the priority groups) and the three drivers of child poverty, and highlights gaps in knowledge.

Looking at the results of this work through a rural/island lens, there are several datasets noted within the data resource spreadsheet that could be analysed to provide sub-local authority data to inform rural and island responses. These are included in Annex 3. Some of the indicators in Annex 3 rely on analysis of census data which is now quite dated. It is also important to note the lack of any indicators in

the PHS data source below local authority level relating to cost of living (including housing costs), private childcare availability and access to advice services.

Feedback on this work has been positive and PHS has alerted other local authorities to the approach, with positive feedback received from some rural/island authorities. As a representative working on child poverty in one rural/island local authority noted in their written feedback on the work to PHS:

“One of the difficulties we have is around the search for easily usable, up to date and meaningful data so this approach is very handy, and I think would help improve our use of data across the partnership to better inform planned outcomes and the actions required to achieve these.”

Very positive comments were also received by PHS about the use of participatory workshops with stakeholders and how the methodology could be rolled out to help local authorities to develop process maps that chart the journey of individuals/families needing support. This process could be tailored to suit the specific needs/priorities in an area.

Crucially, the PHS work outlined in the previous section highlights the importance of what local knowledge can tell local authorities and partners about child poverty, as well as what gaps there are in our understanding. Local knowledge not captured in statistical datasets includes the points shown in Figure 6.

In all local authority regions, the child poverty action reports provide a very helpful insight into the different needs and priorities in each local authority area, and the extent to which local knowledge informs the local approach. However, it can be difficult to isolate child poverty from the wider partnership work being undertaken by predominantly rural/island local authorities to address poverty and inequality. For example, in the Highland region, child poverty is considered in the *Highland Outcome Improvement Plan*, the *Highland Council Corporate Plan and Strategic Priorities*, the *For Highland’s Children* children’s services plan, the *Regional Improvement Collaborative Plan*¹⁷, and the *Highland Economic Forum and Collaborative Action Plan*. Nonetheless, the Highland action report describes how the CPP looks beyond income-based drivers to consider wider socio-economic inequalities¹⁸ and recognises how a range of factors have a significant impact on poverty: lack of equality of opportunity, barriers to accessing services, transport, etc. This local authority also recognises the rural dimension of the experience of poverty in its action report – the ‘poverty of opportunity’.

¹⁷ The [Northern Alliance](#) is the Regional Improvement Collaborative between eight local authorities in the north of Scotland: Orkney, Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire, Argyll and Bute, Western Isles, Highland, Moray, and Shetland. The collaborative focuses on improving educational attainment, closing the attainment gap, improving children’s health and wellbeing, and improving employability.

¹⁸ As noted in the Highland Council Year 1 Child Poverty Action Report. See also the Scottish Government’s Child Poverty system map: <https://data.gov.scot/child-poverty-system-map/>

Figure 6: Local knowledge that can help to target local action effectively (extracted from Public Health Scotland, 2021)

<i>Income from employment</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The availability of flexible (family-friendly) job opportunities offered by anchor institutions (including in advertised positions) - The combined contribution of UK, Scotland and local employability programmes at a local level (including data from the Parental Employability Support Fund*) - The contribution of DWP and Jobcentre Plus to employability - Uptake of free childcare places (including for eligible two-year-olds) - Number of private childcare providers
<i>Income from social security</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of people supported by advice services - Total value of income maximised through advice services - Total value of debt managed - Number of people supported with debt advice - Number of people supported with budgeting - Number of referrals to support services - Number of pregnant women supported - Income generated for pregnant women - Number of referral pathways established - Number of public sector staff trained in welfare advice/awareness - Number of financial education sessions delivered to schools - Social Security Scotland engagement with schools - Free school meals/clothing grants - Local data on families with children receiving Scottish Welfare Fund
<i>Costs of living</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Private rental costs (at local authority level)**

* To be meaningful, employability data needs to be compared against scale of need. Data on personal tax credits allow for out-of-work and in-work families with children to be identified at a small area level, but Universal Credit household statistics do not currently allow this distinction to be made for families.

** Official statistics are not currently published at local authority level. This gap could be filled by local knowledge or through data from private sources such as Gumtree/Citylets.

3.3 Lived experience data

In the expert interviews conducted for this briefing, the importance of 'lived experience data' was repeatedly noted. Understanding the experiences of children and their families is seen as important not only for providing efficient and effective support but also to raise awareness of the daily hardship that people must deal with.¹⁹ In a rural/island context, this type of data is particularly important when considering the data challenges highlighted above, alongside the hidden nature of rural poverty.

This type of approach was central to the PHS stakeholder workshops that considered the journeys of a 'pen portrait' family through the support system. At the 2021 National Child Poverty Conference hosted by the Improvement Service²⁰, the

¹⁹ See, for example, this account by a mother in Fife, shared by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as part of their work on raising awareness of poverty in the UK: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/how-people-experiences-poverty-can-help-unlock-solutions>

²⁰ Recordings of the sessions from the conference are available [here](#).

importance of lived experience data was repeatedly emphasised by participants as being central to effective, targeted local action.

Several pieces of work have recognised the importance of this type of data in a rural/island context. Recent research conducted for Transport Scotland (McHardy and Robertson, 2021) explored the public transport experiences of individuals. Importantly, this work reinforced how transport is a key cost in daily life that is difficult to balance against other essential living costs. There are specific issues experienced by rural residents, as well as people feeling stigma and discrimination when using public transport. These issues are amplified by challenges related to limited access to public transport and the availability of services.

When considering progress in relation to closing the poverty-related attainment gap in Scotland, work has revealed that schools in rural areas are less likely to include a specific focus on those affected by disadvantage (Scottish Government, 2021d). In a survey of headteachers, those based in rural areas were less likely to feel that they understood the challenges faced by pupils affected by poverty. Similarly, headteachers of rural schools that are not in receipt of the Attainment Scotland Fund were less aware of the range of potential range of approaches to help to close the poverty-related attainment gap. This type of local knowledge is important, particularly when skills/attainment levels are not the best proxies for wage levels in a rural context.

Nonetheless, progress is being made overall in relation to addressing the poverty-related attainment gap (Scottish Government, 2021d) and the recent refresh of the Scottish Attainment Challenge programme (backed by £1bn of investment in this Parliament) presents an opportunity to continue this progress and consider how rural headteachers can be supported to invest Pupil Equity Funding in a way that helps disadvantaged pupils in their schools.

It remains to be seen what the full extent of the impacts of school closures will be on the educational attainment gap in rural/island communities, although the investment by Scottish Government in the distribution of devices and internet connectivity packages was welcomed by support organisations and families. With a 'new poverty' emerging as a result of changing circumstances associated with the pandemic, connectivity provision for young people living in disadvantaged settings in remote/rural communities has been highlighted as a particular issue that requires more investigation to understand experiences (Scottish Government, 2021e).

In 2021, the Northern Alliance held workshops in which participants were asked to reflect on possible pathways that link poverty and attainment in the Alliance area. Themes included distance to school, seasonality of work, physical isolation, cost of living, lack of/distance to services, minority ethnic groups, cultural aspirations, digital infrastructure, small schools and limited resources. Several challenges that are not currently documented in mainstream literature were discussed, including lack of

extracurricular activities and limited resources in rural schools, both of which were cited by participants as crucial areas affecting children. The next steps of this project involve mapping both large-scale data and more informal evidence held locally, emphasising the importance of the lived experience data to develop a robust modelling framework that can be used to better understand the links between poverty and attainment in the region (Congreve and McFayden, 2021).

3.4 *What are the gaps in our understanding?*

Progress towards the national child poverty reduction targets in Scotland is subject to rigorous evaluation, drawing on detailed statistics on:

- employment (hours worked, pay, employment and underemployment, skills under-utilisation, skills and qualification levels);
- childcare (availability, affordability and access);
- transport;
- costs of living (housing, energy and food);
- ‘enablers’ of wellbeing (debt, access to affordable credit, savings levels and internet access); and
- benefits ‘reach’, levels, and take-up (Round and Longlands, 2020).

However, progress against targets is generally measured at the national level and the research and data analysis outlined so far reinforces concerns about the pitfalls of data used to measure and monitor poverty in a rural/island context. The national data cannot tell local authorities and partners whether local actions are effective.

National data can be disaggregated locally and can perhaps be used more effectively to track changes through time. This was highlighted above using the DWP/HMRC after housing costs analysis and there are clearly opportunities for more local-level analysis using SIMD, the Local Child Poverty Dashboard and other data identified in the PHS project that is available below local authority level. However, some of the experts interviewed for this briefing noted challenges with small rural/island samples within national datasets, as well as the limited capacity within some local authorities to analyse data at sub-local authority level for the child poverty action reports (and additional data analysis can become a distraction for local leads who are otherwise focussed on local actions and evaluation). For those able to carry out additional data analysis, the PHS child poverty data source provides an excellent entry point into the various datasets available at different scales.

Comparisons between local authorities tend to focus on relative position and can provide misleading evidence of local impact of actions. Nonetheless, local data can be used to evidence the scale of the problem locally, help to understand the nature of the problem at a given time, inform priority local actions, and build a case for funding. Crucially, local leads need to focus on local issues, with energy best spent on targeted evaluation, programme assessment, budget development, outcome

monitoring and implementation oversight. That way, it would become easier for local leads to understand ‘what works’ and target future resources accordingly.

The PHS work identified key knowledge gaps, derived from extensive workshop discussions with stakeholders. These included: a more detailed understanding of barriers to work for parents; childcare capacity at a *local* level²¹; a review of the contribution of economic planning to child poverty (and what indicators might be used to monitor this); local impacts of the two-child benefit limit; fuel poverty costs for families at a *local* level; and the quality of local relationships between local, UK and Scotland-wide social security programmes (tested against experiences of those who use the system). The experts interviewed for this briefing also suggested that key data gaps exist in relation to the following aspects in rural/island communities: benefits take-up; cost of living; fuel poverty; childcare; the cost of doing business in rural areas; and the lived experience of support for those in poverty.

It has already been noted that **benefits uptake** is typically lower in rural areas than in urban areas. For example, work in rural England by the Commission for Rural Communities (2007) used administrative data to calculate uptake as a proportion of those eligible for benefits and revealed a systematic relationship between settlement size and take-up of pension credit. In Scotland, official published statistics on welfare benefits show the number of applications received, decisions made, and payments issued (by local authority). However, there is no published information on eligible populations and therefore it is not possible to calculate uptake rates at the local level. The Scottish Government publishes estimates of uptake of the Scottish Child Payment and Best Start Payments, but these are only at the national level²².

Recent research has highlighted the need to combine person-centred and place-based measures in tackling rural poverty and social exclusion, noting the importance of voluntary and community organisations in making people aware of their welfare entitlements:

“It is striking how often people’s awareness of, and application for, national person-based measures, such as welfare entitlements, has been facilitated by local place-based measures, such as advice and support from CABs and other VCSEs, or through local partnership working. It is also evident that national policies are designed and implemented without the benefit of local place-based knowledge.” (Shucksmith et al., 2021, p.27).

Increased understanding of the role and importance of these organisations in a rural and island context is likely to help target support for VCSEs to continue to tackle the challenge of lower benefits uptake in rural and island communities. This research

²¹ Note the Early learning and childcare data transformation project: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/early-learning-and-childcare-data-transformation-project/pages/advisory-group/>

²² See <https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-security-scotland-act-2018-benefit-take-up-strategy-october-2021/pages/9/>

also drew attention to the need for rural and island proofing of the welfare system by DWP with support from Scottish Government. Rural challenges which potentially impinge on child poverty include distances to travel for work capability assessments or the wait for an assessment, the lack of face-to-face information and advice provision locally, and feelings of stigma which are amplified in rural localities. Again, understanding lived experiences of these challenges will help to design suitable interventions.

In relation to **cost of living**, while the Minimum Income Standards work provides a very clear picture of the additional rural/island living costs, there is potential to consider these costs at a more local level, using the qualitative and deliberative methodologies more widely to understand how families allocate their living costs and what individual coping strategies they use. This would enable local support organisations to provide more targeted and informed support, as well as capture the variation of people's experiences. Importantly, this type of approach would support work underway on Community Wealth Building, putting people's lived experiences at the heart of decisions about the economy and supporting local authorities to work with the private, third and community sectors to deliver a wellbeing economy²³.

There is also potential to consider broader work on food prices that is not always framed from a poverty perspective, or which analyses commercial data. For example, recent work by Revoredo-Giha and Russo (2020) analysed whether remote rural areas in Scotland suffer from food prices that are higher than the country's average prices, using 'expensiveness indexes' for a basket of food calculated from commercial data in the Kantar Worldpanel consumer database.

The higher cost of living in remote rural, remote small town and island areas has been recognised in an amendment to Scottish Fuel Poverty legislation²⁴ which raised the Minimum Income Standard used in the measurement of fuel poverty (Gavin, 2021). However, current **local level fuel poverty data** is deemed less reliable than for urban contexts due to being based on small sample sizes in the Scottish Household Survey. In the Highland Council region, for example, small sample sizes mean that the data often skews to Inverness. The small sample sizes also make it challenging to monitor change over time (Wilson, 2016).

Several gaps in our understanding remain in relation to **uptake and provision of early learning and childcare** in rural and island contexts. Factors preventing uptake include additional travel burdens (Scottish Government, 2019b) and the cost/practicalities of childcare delivery, particularly in island communities (Scottish Government, 2021f).

²³ The new [10-year National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#) commits to creating an inclusive wellbeing economy, to ensure issues such as child poverty (that have been exacerbated by the pandemic) are addressed.

²⁴ The Fuel Poverty (Additional Amount in respect of Remote Rural Area, Remote Small Town and Island Area) (Scotland) Regulations 2020.

There is also the potential to understand the impact of **employability and skills development initiatives**²⁵ in rural/island contexts and the extent to which these are contributing to local action on child poverty. Skills development plays an important role in underpinning inclusive rural economic growth, with a range of important interdependencies that can enhance or constrain progress (e.g. availability of affordable housing, digital connectivity). As noted in the PHS child poverty project, it would be helpful to unpack the combined contribution of UK, Scotland and local employability programmes at a local level (including data from the Parental Employability Support Fund).

3.5 Recommendations for improving understanding of child poverty in rural and island communities

Recommendations

1. Recognise **lived experiences as valid and important qualitative data** for informing place-based decisions and actions in rural and island communities.
2. **Support the Improvement Service** to continue its work on sharing good practice, particularly in relation to local data analysis and other available evidence to inform action in rural and island communities.
3. Enable Public Health Scotland to support the **roll out of the child poverty data source and associated workshops** to all local authorities (in collaboration with the Improvement Service when implementing recommendation 2).
4. **Use the child poverty action reports strategically** to understand and share best practice and provide additional support to those local authorities with less capacity to undertake local level data collection and analysis.
5. Set up a **Rural and Island Child Poverty Network** (or similar) that places a strong emphasis on sharing knowledge and best practice between local leads (across sectors – health, education, transport, etc.), including the Improvement Service, PHS, Social Security Scotland, SPIRU and other researchers.

1. *Recognise lived experiences as valid and important qualitative data for informing place-based decisions and actions in rural and island communities.*

Recognising the local context is of great importance when tackling child poverty in rural and island communities. Therefore, there is a need to underpin any new initiatives with local consultation and understanding of lived experiences. This emphasis on ‘local intelligence for local actions’ was supported by many of the

²⁵ For example, the [Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland](#) and [Parental Employability Support Fund](#).

expert interviewees, as well as the need to listen to the voices and experiences of children in rural and island communities²⁶.

There is potential to use existing community levers to collect and interpret this type of data, as well as implement actions to respond to the findings. Existing community-level institutions, such as LEADER Local Action Groups and other place-based voluntary and community organisations should be supported to improve understanding of the issues and related actions that can help to address child poverty at the local level.

- 2. Support the Improvement Service to continue its work on sharing good practice, particularly in relation to local data analysis and other available evidence to inform action in rural and island communities.*

The co-ordination role of the Improvement Service in Scotland has been praised by those looking to improve child poverty actions both within Scotland and also in England (Round and Longlands, 2020). The Improvement Service's proactive work with stakeholders provides formal linkages between local leads and a platform for sharing good practice, learning, local intelligence and data (quantitative and qualitative). With sufficient resources, the Improvement Service, in partnership with Public Health Scotland, has a role to play going forwards in identifying important knowledge and data gaps – particularly in relation to lived experiences – and working with rural/island local leads and other appropriate partners to support local action.

- 3. Enable Public Health Scotland to support the roll out of the child poverty data source and associated workshops to all local authorities (in collaboration with the Improvement Service when implementing recommendation 2).*

In a rural/island context it is vital to develop local understanding of how well financial inclusion/referral pathways are working. The PHS child poverty data source and accompanying family-centred workshop methodology provide a robust approach for understanding how local services might better help children in need of support. The combination of guidance on data that can be analysed at a sub-local authority level and the participatory discussion of lived experiences of the local child poverty 'system' provides an excellent opportunity for any local authority with rural/island communities to improve how it helps low-income families.

This approach would support local authorities and other partners to evaluate and evidence progress without determining this by league table positions and trends in local authority level data.

- 4. Use the child poverty action reports strategically to understand and share best practice and provide additional support to those local authorities with less capacity to undertake local level data collection and analysis.*

²⁶ The importance of this has also been recognised by [Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland](#) and underpins their action research approach in both urban and rural communities.

There is an opportunity to use the child poverty action reports more strategically to inform learning within and between local authorities, as well as to highlight the difference experiences of child poverty in rural/island contexts as compared to urban.

The results of the ongoing systematic review of the action reports by the SPIRU research team at Glasgow Caledonian University could be used to provide a cross-cutting basis for an overarching rural and island child poverty plan that is rooted in local knowledge and local action in these communities. The experiences documented in the local action reports provide a wealth of qualitative data on local initiatives and impacts, which will provide crucial evidence going forwards about 'what works' (this is also the focus of our second briefing). However, the existence of such a plan should not reduce the attention paid to rural and island experiences of child poverty in the second tackling child poverty delivery plan.

- 5. Set up a Rural and Island Child Poverty Unit (or similar) that places a strong emphasis on sharing knowledge and best practice between local leads (across sectors – health, education, transport, etc.), including the Improvement Service, PHS, SPIRU and other researchers.*

The reduction of child poverty in rural Scotland requires both coordination (between departments and levels of government and with partners) and diversity (to reflect localised contexts and to develop place-based approaches). Therefore, the most notable opportunity in terms of addressing knowledge gaps is supporting continued working across government, agencies and partners to ensure a joined-up approach while also enabling action and knowledge exchange across a network of community planning partnerships at the local level.

A Rural and Island Child Poverty Unit (or similar) may provide the vehicle to promote a systematic, joined-up approach to working across government and with national and local partners to address any data gaps needed to support the reduction child poverty in rural and island areas. A joined-up group like this would be able to continue to work on key data challenges, including: the lack of information about welfare benefits eligibility and uptake in rural and island communities; the need for more meaningful rural/island population samples to be collected within national survey data; and encouraging and supporting lived experience data collection and mapping existing service provision/children's journeys through support routes.

Based on the evidence and recommendations presented in this briefing,

Figure 7 also suggests some opportunities for improving evidence/knowledge to support the delivery of current commitments in the Programme for Government.

Figure 7: Key points to consider going forwards (linked with current Programme for Government commitments)

Programme for Government commitment 2021-2022	Opportunities for improved evidence to support child poverty action in rural and island communities
<p>A Land of Opportunity</p> <p>Extend Scottish Child Payment to children under 16 by the end of 2022, and double it to £20 per week, per child as quickly as possible thereafter.</p> <p>Provide immediate support to children and young people through Scottish Child Payment bridging payments of £520 in both 2021 and 2022.</p>	<p>The success of the Scottish Child Payment in reducing child poverty will depend on uptake of other benefits (Congreve, 2019). Applicants need to be in receipt of one or more welfare benefit to receive the SCP.</p> <p>Receipt of the payment could help to strengthen the impact of planned and existing measures to reduce child poverty in rural and island areas by using it as a 'gateway' to other payments and services, and by ensuring that recipients are making full use of those which are in place.</p> <p>This would need to be driven by effective design and rigorous monitoring, with additional arrangements for collaboration and data sharing about welfare eligibility and uptake to inform local partners.</p>
<p>Begin work on a Minimum Income Guarantee</p>	<p>The proposed Minimum Income Guarantee work needs to include a rural and island lens in its development.</p> <p>Important considerations include the role that taxation could play (see Eiser, 2019) and the potential for Social Security Scotland to consider tax changes/nudges for employers offering flexible working hours, skills development, etc. in a rural/island context.</p> <p>Interactions between child poverty and fiscal arrangements have complicated impacts on welfare eligibility that are also important to consider. The cost of living also needs to be factored in.</p>
<p>Invest £1 billion over this Parliament to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap.</p>	<p>Encourage those working on the poverty-related attainment gap to look beyond education and forge strong partnerships with health, transport and other local partners.</p> <p>Recognising the lower level of understanding in rural schools of the challenges faced by pupils affected by poverty, there is potential to monitor and encourage new relationships between schools and other local organisations offering support to families experiencing financial hardship.</p>
<p>Deliver a package of support to tackle the cost of the school day, and ensure all children have access to the same opportunities.</p>	<p>Although there has been work on ‘the cost of the school day’ (see the CPAG toolkit, for example), there is scope to understand ‘the cost of the rural/island school day’ in more detail.</p>

<p>Work to expand funded early learning and childcare for children aged 1 and 2, starting with low-income households within this Parliament.</p>	<p>Although the broad challenges of rural/island childcare provision are quite well-documented, local childcare needs surveys are likely to help to design appropriate services in rural and island communities.</p>
<p>Build a system of wraparound school age childcare.</p>	<p>For example, a survey of local childcare need conducted by the Mull and Iona Community Trust in 2016 revealed a large proportion of respondents looking for childcare (53 of 117 responses).</p>
<p>An economy that works for all of Scotland's people and places</p>	
<p>Invest an additional £500 million to support the new, good and green jobs of the future, including upskilling and reskilling people to access those.</p>	<p>Understand the combined contribution of UK, Scotland and local employability programmes at a rural and island local level (including data from the Parental Employability Support Fund).</p>
<p>Help people get the skills they need to access the green jobs of the future.</p>	<p>Also understand and address any challenges related to delivery of these programmes in a rural/island setting (these are considered in the subsequent briefing).</p>
<p>Living better</p>	
<p>Deliver 110,000 affordable homes across Scotland by 2032, with at least 70% in the social rented sector and 10% in our remote, rural and island communities supported by a Remote, Rural & Islands Action Plan.</p>	<p>Document the views/experiences of local leads about the impact of second homes/holiday lets in rural and island communities and how that distorts house prices in rural and island communities, leading to impacts on child poverty.</p>
<p>Start rolling out the £325 million Place Based Investment Programme, supporting community led regeneration.</p>	<p>An audit of community spaces in rural and island communities would help to inform an appropriate targeting of this fund.</p>
<p>Families experiencing disadvantage require access to support services that often use community meeting spaces, libraries, churches, etc. How best to engage these families in the development of these services is important but should also be mindful of the day-to-day pressures that may limit their capacity to engage.</p>	<p>Make sure our communities are well connected, investing in new and better public transport links and keeping ferry travel affordable for our islands.</p>
<p>Several interviewees noted that transport is the biggest barrier to increasing income from employment (the first driver of child poverty).</p>	<p>Continue to understand people's experiences in relation to rural/island transport and invite suggestions for solutions (as in McHardy and Richardson, 2021).</p>

4 Interventions to tackle rural and island child poverty

This section describes some existing interventions that were explored for this study. The [recently published annex](#) to the second child poverty delivery plan (2022-26) also summarises the latest evidence on what works in tackling child poverty (in all types of communities) (Scottish Government, 2022b).

4.1 Employment and skills-development interventions

The [Parental Employment Support Fund](#) (PESF) is one example of such an intervention, providing person-centred support to parents facing barriers to entering or progressing their careers. The support includes help to gain qualifications, improving skills or work experience, money advice and motivational support. This is a new employability offer for parents including upskilling and training opportunities, a dedicated keyworker and support to access childcare and transport.

The research team spoke to two local authority representatives engaged in delivering the PESF in their region. The key issues related to delivering this support in a rural/island context are summarised in Box 1. The lessons learned from these rural experiences will be important in informing the scaling up of investment in the No One Left Behind approach as set out in the new 2022-26 Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan and the [Empowering Communities Programme](#) to ensure that it is as relevant in a rural and island setting as in an urban setting.

Box 1: The Parental Employment Support Fund (PESF)

Key challenges associated with delivery of the PESF in rural/island contexts:

- Short-term allocation of funds has made it challenging for local authorities to recruit PESF co-ordinators/key workers in rural regions. This is because the funding is only guaranteed until the end of the financial year, making it difficult to advertise long-term posts that appeal to applicants.
- Responses to advertised posts have been low, with only six applicants for five key worker roles and two applicants for one co-ordinator in one local authority region.
- Like social care roles in rural areas, it is assumed that people often ‘do not want to work on their own patch’ as these types of support roles can be hard to do when you are known in the communities you work in.
- Similarly, for those adults engaging with the training/skills sessions, some would prefer to travel further or not take part, because they do not wish to be visible in the community as ‘needing support’.
- There are also challenges related to public transport for those wishing to attend skills/training sessions funded through PESF. Lack of childcare is also a challenge.

Opportunities

- The individual approach taken in the PESF by key workers is enabling relationships to be built with parents/carers and increased understanding of what they need/what their aspirations are.
- There is scope to think about how this type of support could be delivered via/with pre-existing community organisations/groups that have good relationships with the community at the local level. There has been some success with channelling PESF funding through these partners and allow them to identify/target families needing support.

- Some of the challenges with delivering support like PESF highlight the importance of community venues/buildings to deliver support services, combined with online/phone support. As one interviewee noted, ‘child poverty isn’t 9 to 5’.
- A longer-term commitment to the PESF (beyond one financial year) is likely to help recruitment and other issues experienced during delivery in a rural and island context.

Families may also be supported through investment in business units or providing support for those wishing to set up businesses (e.g. through the Scottish Government’s proposed [Islands Bond](#)), or investment in affordable, energy efficient housing or in terms of tackling adult physical and mental health challenges. Any intervention needs to be focused on tackling the challenge/s that is/are most acute in a particular local area and identifying that/those requires local place-based evidence gathering, hearing the voices of those families and children experiencing poverty. The Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-26 includes a commitment to strengthen Local Employability Partnerships (LEPs) which will enable the provision of locally tailored responses and, more broadly, the No One Left Behind approach which is based on:

“a long-term, scalable and flexible place-based model of delivery where Scottish and Local Government work with partners from across the public, third and private sectors to deliver person-centred solutions to labour market challenges as they arise.” (Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-26, p31).

4.2 Early years interventions

Evidence suggests that offering intensive support to those who are most vulnerable to experiencing poverty and starting young (e.g. pre- and post-natal support and interventions, home visiting in infancy, parent support programmes, and pre-school day care) is important and may achieve more ‘success’ (Save the Children, 2018). From an economic point of view, Heckman’s (2016) work showed that the rate of return on investments in early childhood development for disadvantaged children can be 13% per child, per year, due to improved outcomes in education, health, sociability and economic productivity (including earning higher incomes and being less likely to become involved in crime) (Save the Children 2018, p.22).

However, it is also worth noting that, while early interventions are critical in enhancing the wellbeing of children, investment in interventions throughout the life course up to post-school and tertiary education which build on these early interventions, are critical too. In Scotland, this is recognised in [Best Start, Bright Futures](#), which includes a new Youth Work Strategy focused on providing services to young people most in need.

The Smith Family’s work in Australia (2012, p.13) confirms the importance of long-term effort and perspective, for example through a ten-year strategy and plan, but

with progress regularly checked and reported over that time period. The impacts of any interventions also need to be measured over the long-term and in an inclusive way, recognising that they may be hard to measure. Particularly interesting from a rural/island perspective, The Smith Family (2012, p.14) note:

“Government contractual arrangements for such initiatives should reflect the period of time required for change to occur and be cognisant of the inefficiencies inherent in short term initiatives, particularly in regional communities where staff recruitment can be challenging.”

However, these early (and indeed later) interventions are likely to be more challenging and expensive to provide to rural and island families where distances are larger and the cost (both financial and time) of home visits is higher than in urban locations. These additional pressures on service providers (at organisational and individual level) need to continue to be acknowledged. This is recognised in the ‘Income Maximisation’ section of the new Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, with the aspiration to enhance access to advice and support in places that families already visit (e.g. placing money advisers in GP surgeries and furthering the Family Nurse Partnership).

There is some existing evidence on the provision of early years and pre-school childcare in rural locations (see Scottish Government, 2021g). Key challenges in rural areas (as compared to urban areas) include: fewer services, resulting in pressure on existing providers; sustaining provision in more remote settings with lower numbers of staff and children; a shortage of transport provision, including drop-off services and public transport; a shortage of suitable venues, with many shared with other groups; and difficulties recruiting staff, particularly for senior roles.

To contribute towards reducing child poverty in rural and island locations, childcare provision needs to be affordable, accessible, of good quality, and as flexible as possible to take account of the working patterns of many of those in the labour market in these areas, such as those working long or irregular hours in agriculture or in hospitality, and where those hours may vary across the year. Flexible childcare is also required to support those families for whom childcare may be needed on a more limited, unpredictable basis, such as to attend welfare-related meetings or to access mental health support services, especially where informal childcare from family and friends is not available.

The research team spoke to representatives from the Mull and Iona Community Trust childcare pilot, which has been supported financially by Scottish Government. The key points raised in that discussion are summarised in Box 2.

Box 2: The Mull and Iona Community Trust (MICT) Childcare Pilot

This island childcare pilot, funded for 12 months by the Scottish Government, has enabled MICT to provide childcare to school age children, 'testing the limits' and trying to develop a model that could be rolled out to other communities. Provision includes after school care and some summer holiday activities. There is no childcare for under-3s in this area.

Key challenges:

- Most of the challenges for a community trust wishing to provide childcare relate to Care Inspectorate regulatory requirements, Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) workforce requirements, and other national rules that limit how creative/flexible they can be. For example, playworkers require a childcare practitioner qualification that takes two years to complete.
- This also raises the question of adequate supply of qualified childcare practitioners available in remote and rural island communities. At present, there is nobody with the required qualifications on Mull, meaning that the establishment of a traditional school age childcare service is extremely difficult.
- This means that the childcare provision on offer has to 'fit the rules' rather than 'fit the need' of local parents and carers. To comply with the rule that after school provision can be for no longer than two hours (due to the level of training of those offering the service), it can be impractical for parents to take up the provision for such a short time, especially when the travel time to pick up/drop off a child is included.
- There is no permanent indoor venue available for after school club/childcare provision. In response, MICT tends to base its provision around outdoor activities, which is challenging in poor weather.

Opportunities:

- Understanding childcare need is vital to ensuring the best provision. A survey of childcare need in 2016 revealed that 53 families were looking for childcare and unable to secure it.
- Relaxing/adjusting the Care Inspectorate rules for their context would have a significant impact on what they could deliver. There is the need for dialogue between the Care Inspectorate and initiatives like these to think about place-based alternatives while still ensuring child safeguarding.
- An extension of the trial would enable the development of more solutions and provision of school age childcare linked to the local school estate, as well as more thought about how to support these types of initiatives in other places.

4.3 Cost of living interventions

Recognising the breadth of drivers that lead families and children to experience poverty and the extent to which those experiences vary, interventions may target their support at different aspects of peoples' lives. For example, fuel costs are known to be a particular contributor to fuel-related poverty in rural and island communities (for various reasons, including, on average, larger and older housing stock and more homes that are off-mains gas grid meaning that households are more reliant on expensive oil or electric heating), so interventions for focusing on reducing costs for these households might be particularly helpful. These might include, for example, schemes to improve house insulation to reduce energy bills, which would also result

in net zero benefits too, as well as reduce the likelihood of additional health problems for children (e.g. relating to mould and related problems such as asthma).

The actions under 'Warm Affordable Homes' in Part B of the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan seek to address issues related to fuel costs, include the delivery of more affordable energy efficient homes in rural communities and the development of a 'Remote, Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan'.

The work by Tighean Innse Gall (TIG) in the Outer Hebrides was cited in the recent [Rural Lives project](#) as an exemplar in terms of providing appropriate energy advice for islands residents. As the Rural Lives project found, not only was the service vital in itself but, when people were undertaking their energy assessment with TIG they could also do a benefits check, overcoming some of the challenges with the stigma felt by rural dwellers when they are considering seeking support. Since the [Rural Lives project](#) was published in 2021 much has changed for TIG in terms of their capability to support the communities that it serves. In March 2022 TIG released a [public statement](#) that was critical of both the UK and Scottish Government, highlighting their 'lived experience' of trying to deliver against the PAS2035/2030 retrofit standards, which were introduced by The United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS).

More information about TIG's services is provided in Box 3.

Box 3: The services of Tighean Innse Gall in the Outer Hebrides

Tighean Innse Gall is a Registered Society under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 that is run primarily for the benefit of the Outer Hebrides community. It supports people to rent, buy and live in comfortable, affordable homes; promotes healthy independent living and assists communities and business to be more sustainable. Specifically, TIG delivers support to those disadvantaged by age, income or disability to insulate, heat and maintain their homes through a variety of advice and funding schemes (although this service has recently ceased).

The 2021 [Rural Lives project](#) highlighted that one of the main 'added values' of TIG's energy service was that when people were doing the energy assessment they could also do a benefits check, which helped to combat rural pride and an often experienced inability to ask for help. One specific example of such partnership working included TIG's fuel poverty and home insulation team working with Stornoway CAB to assist benefit uptake in Harris. In the Rural Lives project, interviewees in Harris revealed many examples of successful and effective joint working, cross-referrals and informal partnership arrangements, involving health practitioners, CAB, TIG, electricity providers, Home Energy Scotland, Macmillan and, of course, the local council and the Community Planning Partnership.

For more information, see the Rural Lives Final report [available online](#).

4.4 Health and wellbeing interventions

Interventions to support an increase in healthy, affordable food consumption for all households are important, but again perhaps particularly so for families in rural and island communities where there may be challenges around consuming adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food at affordable prices. For residents of remote rural and island communities, access to food is known to involve adaptation of living style and travel outside the local area as a normal and integral part of food shopping, to access wider retail assortment and lower food prices (Marshall et al., 2018).

It is recognised that when households cannot access appropriate and affordable fresh, quality food there is a trade-off in the sense that the nutritional quality of the diet is reduced to preserve quantity, which may in turn lead to health problems, including obesity. Fife Local Action Group is currently undertaking work to improve food security across south and West Fife with funding from the Scottish Government's [Rural Communities Testing Change Fund](#) (Tranche 1). This project is working with communities to explore a range of issues including where people buy food from and how they shop, what they eat, attitudes to food waste etc. Learning from this project might be useful in terms of informing further work in the area of food poverty in future.

4.5 Integrated interventions

Many families will experience drivers of poverty at the same time and in inter-related ways, therefore interventions that recognise the inter-play of different factors and involve different partners are likely to be best placed to 'succeed'. The Smith Family's work in Australia has commended the Government's *Communities for Children* Programme. One of the strengths of this programme is bringing together diverse sectors, organisations and individuals from a particular community so that they can identify gaps and priorities and plan together to implement, over time, a range of strategies to address those priorities.

The work also highlights one of the conclusions from the UK's Children's Trust Pathfinders which was that:

“working with the grain of previously established collaborative practices was essential, particularly where the organisational boundaries of different services overlapped” (University of East Anglia, 2007).

As suggested in this existing evidence, this partnership working is critical at local level but also by national government too where there needs to be cross-portfolio working so that the impacts of a change in one policy area are understood elsewhere and throughout 'the system'. National government has a role to play in developing frameworks to enable and facilitate that partnership working at national, regional and local levels, and in ensuring that there are clear mechanisms for tracking progress over time. This includes cross-policy team working within Government, which includes rural and island policy teams to ensure that the specific circumstances of

these communities are taken into account in decisions regarding policy priorities, design and delivery - and that an expectation for this to be the case is mainstreamed.

However, it is critical that children and young people themselves, families, communities and schools all have a voice and work together at local level to ensure that children's health and wellbeing are maximised. More information about the UK Government's Children's Trust Pathfinders established in 2004 is provided in Box 4, while Australia's Children's Centres are discussed in a little more detail in Box 5. The new Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan in Scotland sets out delivery of a Pathfinders approach initially in urban areas, with the approach potentially expanded to rural and island areas in due course.

Box 4: Children's Trust Pathfinders in England

Thirty five Children's Trust Pathfinders were set up in 2004 bringing together education, health, social services and other partners, to promote cooperation with the aim of improving children's wellbeing. They were based on common principles, but local flexibility was encouraged in order to respond to local needs and opportunities. There are a number of over-arching lessons which can be learned from the Pathfinders with respect to interventions to support children and young people:

- Acted as a catalyst for more integrated approaches to the diagnosis and provision of services for children;
- Brought together a variety of statutory and local services with the aim of enabling them to make a difference to the wellbeing of children and young people
- Began to develop expertise in joint commissioning of services across traditional organisational boundaries
- Sometimes found it difficult to engage partners in key sectors, notably where there are funding difficulties or complex accountability frameworks;
- Enabled joined-up approaches to workforce development and training;
- Facilitated the development of new types of professionals able to work across long-standing organisational and professional boundaries;
- Reported early indications of local positive outcomes for children and young people;
- Learnt a great deal about the complexity of change management in children's service provision.

A number of key policy messages were distilled from the evaluation which may inform thinking around the shaping of future child poverty interventions in Scotland:

- Development of these arrangements requires both enabling national policy and the enthusiasm and dynamism of local agents
- Those engaged in local activities should be involved in shaping national developments
- In partnership and collaborative working there need to be clear lines of accountability and decision-making; more successful relationships were built where there was a coherent and long-term vision
- Children, young people and parents/carers need to be fully and meaningfully involved in shaping local activities (e.g. through co-design and co-construction of projects)
- Mechanisms for involving under-represented sectors/individuals should be found, including GPs, police authorities, education and learning providers, private sector service providers, etc.
- Senior staff from all organisations need to be committed and visible in these arrangements
- School clusters were found to have an important role in service planning.

Information taken from: Department for Education and Skills (2007)

Box 5: South Australia's Childrens' Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting

South Australia's Childrens' Centres bring together a range of services for early childhood development, and for parents and families including childcare for children of a range of ages, education, health, community development activities and family services. Following the principle of placing the child/young person at the centre of service delivery, the Centres provide a range of learning and development activities for children in the context of their families and communities through a collaborative and partnership approach by service providers and local communities with services tailored to their local setting.

Research has found these Centres have had positive impacts on children's health and wellbeing, and key has been not following an expectation that children and families will fit into services which are not designed to respond to their diversity of experience and their changing needs. Work by The Smith Family (2012, p5) highlights one Children's Centre in Port Adelaide/Enfield which has led to a growth in the opportunities and services being offered to families. This includes a range of outreach programmes for young mums and some more disengaged families and some home-based initiatives such as *Learning together@home*. It is also noted that the Centre is well located and provides good access to potential users from across the surrounding area.



4.6 Digital and school-based interventions

Over the last two years in particular, the role of digital technology has expanded in terms of delivering a vast range of services, including relating to health and education. Work by the Smith Family in Australia (2012, p.6-7) has reviewed a number of programmes focused on building the skills of young people and enhancing their networks, both of which will, in turn, enhance their health and wellbeing.

One programme is *i-Track* which uses online technology to connect young people in more rural and dispersed communities with others elsewhere to receive mentoring and support for career and post-school pathways. This programme has been particularly effective in communities where employment, education and training options may be limited (which is the case in many rural communities) or where there are relatively low levels of post-school education. The s2s reading programme enables additional resources to be brought to communities to support young people

whose reading age is behind their chronological age to support them to improve their reading. In general, The Smith Family highlight that:

“finding innovative ways to use technology and deliver programs is essential if young people in regional and rural communities are not to experience significant disadvantage.”

Having said that, though, it is important to recognise that not all rural children and young people will have access to adequate digital equipment and connectivity to participate in such activities, with those at-risk or in poverty most likely to lack access and therefore be excluded. The new Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan includes a commitment to invest in bringing more families online, particularly digitally excluded low income families (through the expansion of [Connecting Scotland](#)), so that they can better access the support available to them online, and a commitment to ensure that every school age child has access to a digital technology device by 2026.

There has been research work done internationally to explore the actual and potential role of schools in serving as hubs for the wider rural and island communities in which they are located. Schools are perhaps the most important contact points with children and young people, some of which involve other services (e.g. health professionals) while the school building itself is a significant piece of infrastructure in often small communities. However, recent work by Children’s Neighbourhoods Scotland (CNS) suggests a move away from schools as hubs, preferring green spaces (CNS, 2022).

One example of the school hub approach is the [Rural Schools Program](#) at Cornell University in New York State working with the State’s [Rural School Association](#). Evidence from the US and UK relates to the importance of extended service or community schools which deliver a range of services (both on site and nearby) through partnership working, often with a wide range of different agencies (which may include before or after school care, adult learning opportunities or community use of the school facilities). Work by The Smith Family (2012) in Australia has also explored the role of rural schools, identifying their potential importance as ‘community hubs’ or ‘one stop locations’. Schools in disadvantaged communities cannot be expected to realise the full potential of children alone given the resources available to them, but they can be a platform to build integrated and comprehensive support for children.

Work by the Foundation for Young Australians (Black et al. 2010; see also Lonsdale et al, 2012) revealed the range of benefits that such extended schools can bring, including: enabling earlier identification of needs and quicker access to services; increasing engagement and participation in school; creating a more positive school environment; improving communication between schools and families and enhancing family engagement in school; improving community connectedness and capacity; and widening the schools external contacts, networks and partnerships and

enhanced social capital. Additional benefits include the generation of positive local economies and reducing the costs of service provision through tackling duplication of services and increasing shared responsibility. They are not necessarily easy to set-up and maintain and resources will need to be devoted to building collaborative relationships but they can deliver multiple benefits to individuals, families and communities, particularly if they are developed in a place-based way, tailored to specific local circumstances.

There have been interventions in Wales previously to support the work of schools as key actors in helping to reduce poverty and support those in poverty (and therefore to reduce the impact of poverty on educational attainment), such as through programmes including [Flying Start](#) (the Welsh Government's early years programme aimed at improving outcomes for families with children under 4), [Families First](#) (a Welsh Government programme focusing on providing multi-agency systems and support for those living in poverty, emphasising prevention and early intervention) and [Communities First](#) (a community-focused Welsh Government programme aimed at reducing persistent poverty in some of the country's most deprived communities). All of these programmes have emphasised the importance of families and other services working closely with schools.

In Scotland, there has been a significant amount of work undertaken through the Scottish Attainment Challenge (Scottish Government, 2021h) and Pupil Equity Funding. Further work to explore the actual/potential wider community roles of rural and island schools in Scotland would be useful. Issues to explore (perhaps through drawing in international experiences) might include:

- The extent to which children's decision-making is impacted by their financial situation e.g. choosing subjects which place a lower financial burden on their family, rather than those which they are good at or are particularly interested in, or choosing to avoid trips, social events, etc. which would be beneficial to their health and wellbeing (although we note that charges associated with core curriculum subjects have been removed).
- The impact of poorly maintained school buildings or other learning environments on children's wellbeing in terms of young people taking poor condition as a reflection on the level of respect in which they are held.
- Exploring the 'good practice' ways in which children and families experiencing poverty are supported by schools and by school-community partnerships which can bring resources, support and opportunities together. Learning and social experiences in and out of schools (including creative enrichment, mentoring, recreational, etc) that enable young people to mix widely, at low or no cost to families, are critically important so young people experiencing economic adversity '*can participate on an equal footing*'.

4.7 Interventions to strengthen the voices of children and young people

The Smith Family's work in Australia (2012, p.13) has explored interventions which are focused on further raising the voices of young people, in particular in South

Australia. Amongst other evidence, their work highlighted a research project undertaken with the University of New South Wales and other partners which involved longitudinal interviews with young people to understand their lived experiences of economic disadvantage and their parents/carers and service providers. The report covered a variety of different issues, but importantly, revealed the importance of directly listening to, and therefore strengthening, the voices of children and young people in order to fully understand their experiences.

On the basis of their work, The Smith Family urged the South Australian Government to take further steps to strengthen the voice of young people, particularly those who are perhaps 'less articulate' and less engaged in existing forums and advocacy channels. Save the Children (2018, p.22) also argued that it is imperative for stakeholders, including elected officials, to create space for rural voices to inform policy decisions. They argued that joint working is required to find and tailor innovative approaches for rural contexts and engage both public and private partners to replicate and scale solutions that work.

There is a range of existing initiatives in Scotland through which the voices of children and young people, including those in rural and island communities, can be articulated, including the [Children's Parliament](#), [Scottish Youth Parliament](#), [Young Scot](#), and particularly their [Young Islander's Network](#), and the [Rural Youth Project](#). Rural and island specific mechanisms can serve as critically important sources of information on the experiences of children and young people in these communities, but it is also important to ensure that 'mainstream' mechanisms also listen to and provide an outlet for the voices of rural and island young people.

The work of Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland focused on reducing poverty and increasing participation in six communities across rural and urban Scotland and there may be important lessons to learn from this work from 2018-2022. As with the project focusing on food insecurity in south and west Fife mentioned earlier, a number of LEADER Local Action Groups are currently undertaking work with young people funded through the Scottish Government's Rural Communities Testing Change Fund, including Cairngorms, Ayrshire and Fife. Again, learning from these projects in terms of how best to engage young people at local level is important. Ensuring that rural and island voices are heard through the Scottish Rural Parliament is vital, as is ensuring that children and young people are represented on an ongoing basis through the rural movement that is emerging in Scotland.

Finally it is worth noting that [Scotland's Climate Assembly](#), working closely with the Children's Parliament, emphasised the incorporation of the voices of children and young people in their deliberations. It may be worth exploring with the Assembly's Secretariat how this was achieved and any lessons learned. Box 6 below recognises the importance of local community voices in designing interventions.

Box 6: Save the Children's work in Harlan County, Kentucky since 1923

The involvement of Save the Children in this county of Kentucky dates back to the 1930s and the need to support families affected by the Great Depression. The work is based on two core assumptions: (i) that community development activities are most successful when designed and implemented locally; and (ii) that those experiencing poverty and disadvantage (not only those who are not) in communities have great and often unrealised talents for solving their problems. For Save the Children, this means that taking a collective impact approach, where people from across the community – the church, local leaders, business, schools, statutory services (such as the police) – come together to create a unifying vision and set of objectives to be delivered through structural collaboration in order to positively impact children, is vital.

Information taken from: Save the Children (2018) *Growing Up in Rural America* (p22)

4.8 Recommendations to shape future interventions on rural and island child poverty

This final section of the report is organised into two parts: the first summarises some specific principles that, based on the evidence here, should inform the shape of future policy and practice interventions to support rural and island children at risk of and living in poverty. Based on these principles, the second part puts forward some specific recommendations for actions that could be put in place to tackle child poverty in rural and island communities, with reference to the newly published [Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026](#).

Many of the points in the second part are based on the fundamental need to undertake rural and island proofing of all interventions to ensure that they are as appropriate for rural and island locations as they are for urban and more densely populated locations (considering the impact on island communities through [Island Communities Impact Assessments](#) is a requirement in the [Islands \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#)).

Guiding principles for policy and practice interventions

Based on the evidence reviewed here, it can be argued that interventions to tackle child poverty in rural and island locations need to:

1. Recognise the higher costs of living experienced by families in these locations.
2. Recognise the higher costs of service delivery in these locations.
3. Ensure interventions are place-based and community-led.
4. Be built on cross-issue, cross-sectoral partnership working at national, regional and local levels to ensure that interventions recognise the inter-related drivers of poverty which need to be tackled in a holistic way.

5. Ensure early intervention and a long-term approach as this is likely to be most effective (which is challenging under single year financial allocations).
6. Place children and families at the centre of the intervention.
7. Explore digital technology as a delivery mechanism, though recognising that this might not always be appropriate.
8. Involve schools as key partners in local interventions.
9. Ensure that all interventions are rural and island proofed (i.e. checked to ensure that they are equally as appropriate in rural and island locations as they are in urban locations and if not that modifications/mitigations are made to design and/or delivery).

5 Suggested actions to tackle child poverty in rural and island locations

1. Structural changes to the rural labour market and increasing employment opportunities

One of the main structural causes of poverty in rural and island locations is the nature of much rural employment with low-paid, seasonal jobs offering few if any training/advancement opportunities all too common. Tackling these challenges requires fundamental changes to the rural labour market, including attracting investment and providing support to diversify the employment base and increase the number of skilled and well-paid jobs, with associated skills training for local people.

Scottish Government policy interventions such as the recently launched [National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#), which sets a vision to build a wellbeing economy by 2032, associated commitments around Fair Work and a Minimum Income Guarantee, and the planned Rural Entrepreneur Fund may help to drive some of these changes, provided that they are appropriately resourced. The new Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-26 also includes significant commitments around increasing fair work opportunities to overcome barriers to parental employment, including through the new No One Left Behind approach, the Parental Transition Fund, the Challenge Fund and work on community wealth building as part of the wellbeing economy agenda. Appropriate monitoring and evaluation work to explore the nature and extent of the outcomes and impacts of these policies in rural and island communities as well as to illuminate where different delivery mechanisms may be required will be important.

2. Ensuring the welfare system is appropriate for rural and island families

This is a second area in which structural change is required. The [Rural Lives project](#) presented evidence demonstrating that the UK benefits system is complex and hard to navigate (especially for those facing additional challenges such as mental health issues) and it is not 'fit-for-purpose' for rural and island households. In particular, the system needs to be more flexible to take account of the volatility of rural incomes and how this leads to payment delays and overpayments that are then clawed back. Work is also needed to ensure full benefit entitlements are being claimed and to provide budgeting and debt advice which is appropriate to rural circumstances (such

as a lack of or distance to travel to local bank branches (where these exist) so a need to improve access to other forms of affordable credit, which in turn will bring improved mental health and wellbeing). Joint service and advice provision to tackle issues of stigma and to reflect the inter-related nature of the poverty challenges facing families in rural and island locations, may also be appropriate. There is potential to learn from ongoing research supported by Scottish Government into the Shetland Anchor project, which is a multi-agency child poverty project. The work wraps support from existing frontline services around the needs of families to directly tackle poverty and inequality, while also avoiding the stigma associated with support provided by other services. This model (or elements of it) could be replicated in other rural and island communities.

The increases in the Child Payment announced by the Scottish Government recently are welcome, but it will be important to review how far these increases impact on families in rural and island communities where the cost of living can be significantly higher. A number of specific interventions announced in the new Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan aim to tackle some of the challenges that evidence suggests are particularly pertinent in rural and island communities, such as a commitment to reduce the complexity of navigating the benefits system, working to address the non-take up of benefits, and expanding access to holistic advice services by enhancing advice provision in places that people already visit (e.g. GP surgeries).

Large-scale investment is also set out in the new Delivery Plan in terms of the Social Innovation Partnerships focused around enhancing wellbeing in holistic ways through Whole Family Wellbeing Funding, including through providing support with childcare, employment and relational support. Ensuring that some of this Partnership work is in rural and island locations will be important to explore how this should be designed and delivered differently in these locations, such as through more digital provision and building on the 'offer' of rural and island locations in terms of wellbeing.

3. Providing affordable and flexible childcare in rural locations

This is critical in rural locations to enable parents to return to work and/or to attend vital welfare or mental health appointments, especially when crucial and valued informal childcare from friends and family is not available. It is possible that formal childcare provision in these locations will not be profit-making due to the need to be flexible, provide out of normal hours care, and to perhaps cater for small and variable numbers of children. Support will therefore need to be provided to the private, public or (perhaps more likely) voluntary organisations that run these services. The childcare 'offering' might include provision of a package or menu of different childcare services from which families can choose depending on their circumstances. In short, the primary aim of such a service/s would not be financial, but would rather be related to harder to measure but vitally important outcomes such as reversing population decline/maintaining local population levels, supporting the attainment of young children, reducing child poverty, etc.

Important lessons can be learned from the Mull and Iona Community Trust Childcare Pilot to inform future place-based interventions in this space, including in terms of the hours required for parents (taking into account travel time from work to the childcare location), the challenges around recruiting appropriate staff already with qualifications or who are prepared to work to get these, the need to ensure affordable housing is available for staff locally, the potential to offer wraparound provision including breakfast and after school clubs, the potential for differential charging levels depending on household income, etc.. As set out in the [Scottish Government's Covid Recovery Strategy](#) published in 2021, work will get underway in 2022-23 to begin the early phasing-in of community level systems of school age childcare, targeted to support the Government's designated six priority groups. Key here is building a system of school age childcare to support a community and developing the role that organised children's activities can play in a school age childcare system alongside the regulated childcare sector to support families, provide choice and improve access to these activities for children from low income households. Again, it is important that at least some of this community-based work takes place in rural and/or island locations to explore how provision might differ depending on the characteristics of these locations (e.g. sparsity of population, the importance of seasonal and variable hours work which is low paid and outwith normal 9-5 working hours, etc.). The Scottish Government is presently engaged in a separate piece of research to inform policy development processes across rural and island Scotland for future school age childcare provision – which has the potential to unlock a broad range of benefits.

The new Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan also includes a number of actions relating to increased investment in childcare, including a commitment to publish a strategic plan for all childcare commitments in summer 2022. It is critical that this planning includes and is informed by commitments in rural and island locations. Pilot projects to provide integrated wraparound childcare in different rural and island locations could be included to see what works best in different communities. The role of the community and voluntary sector will be critical here, and a commitment to long-term funding, staff training, etc is vital for these projects to work effectively. It is positive to see the new Delivery Plan include a commitment to provide multi-year funding for the third sector where possible.

4. Addressing the cost of living crisis

Price rises, in particular for food and fuel, are deeply worrying, particularly for those families in rural and island locations who already have to rely on more expensive private transport, have higher heating bills, and have difficulty accessing cheaper healthy food. It would be worth the Scottish Government proactively monitoring the impacts of these price rises on rural and island children, particularly those at risk of or already experiencing poverty, to ascertain what, if anything, families and children are having to forego in order to afford to run their households (even with the commitments to increase the Scottish Child Payment) and how they could be best

supported. Support could be in the form of public welfare payments, and the newly published Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026 sets out the Government's plans in this regard, and/or in the form of community and voluntary sector led initiatives such as food banks, community-led food projects, etc. Ongoing communication between Scottish Government, community partners and the voluntary sector will continue to be vital for the views of people with direct experience of food insecurity to be heard, to inform the approach to reduce the need to access food banks or food aid providers.

It may be worth considering the value of setting up a focused Rural and Island Child Poverty Task Group to gather evidence and information from rural and island families about the impacts of the current circumstances, how they are responding and how they could be best supported. This Group could be convened by Scottish Government but include all relevant stakeholders operating across all the breadth of service delivery, including transport, housing, welfare, economic development and business support, etc. and researchers too, in order to ensure that responses are as holistic as possible. The National Rural Mental Health Forum may be a good 'model' here as this brings together rural and mental health stakeholders on a regular basis.

An alternative/additional option might be to include child poverty, given its importance as the Scottish Government's national mission, as a regular standing item on the agenda for the Rural Economy and Communities Stakeholder Group which meets quarterly. Attendees could then share their knowledge of both experiences and responses 'on-the-ground' and of gaps in knowledge and alternative interventions that are required.

5. Tackling housing and transport challenges

A lack of affordable housing and poor public transport provision leading to a need to run a private car are key drivers of poverty in rural and island locations. And often families are facing these challenges at the same time as a higher and rising cost of living as food and fuel prices go up.

Further investment in affordable social housing provision in rural and island locations is vital and the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026 sets out plans for investment in the Affordable Housing Supply Programme. The Plan also includes a commitment to a community bus fund and a review of how Demand Responsive Transport can best support low income families. Both actions include rural and island locations, which will be helpful to explore the specificities of running such interventions in these locations.

It may be appropriate to explore how some of these structural drivers of poverty can be further addressed through community-based projects funded through future Community Led Local Development funding (such as for local community and Demand Responsive Transport schemes, community buses, local food and growing projects, etc.). Application forms for the funding round in 2021-22 asked applicants to

demonstrate how their proposed activities targeted Scottish Government policy priorities and target groups and future applications could be more closely tied to child poverty as a priority area. The same focus could be introduced to other Scottish Government funding streams such as the Islands Programme and Regeneration funding.

6. Ensuring rural and island locations can access 'mainstream' place-based funding

While rural- or island-only funding streams such as those mentioned here are welcome, it is important that rural and island locations are able to bid for funding from mainstream place-based funding sources, including those mentioned in the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, such as the Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund, the pathfinders exploring whole system change, local community wealth building action plans, the Place Based Investment Programme, and investment in local play parks and childcare.

Appropriate mechanisms are required to ensure that all places are eligible to apply for funding from these programmes. It would not be appropriate, for example, for places to be eligible on the basis of their SIMD ranking as this is known to hide rural and island poverty. Moreover, even if rural or island based projects are projected to reach fewer people in terms of their targets, the impacts of such investment in terms of reducing depopulation/ encouraging repopulation, improving physical and mental health and wellbeing, etc. should be the outcomes against which such projects are measured.

7. Recognising the higher cost of service delivery in rural and island locations

Services such as health visiting, one-to-one debt advice, keyworker support to families on welfare payments and/or employability, etc. cost more to deliver in locations where the population is more dispersed and individuals have to travel longer distances (with associated higher fuel costs) to reach clients. Provider organisations need to recognise this for their individual staff (e.g. who may need higher mileage allowances to cover rising fuel costs) and funders need to recognise this in their funding to provider organisations (e.g. by providing more substantial funding packages and/or more flexible targets).

8. Strengthening mechanisms for hearing the voices of rural and island children and young people

As described earlier, a number of rural and island specific and general mechanisms exist to gather the voices of young people from across Scotland. It is important to ensure that these voices are heard by a range of stakeholders, including Scottish Government and non-rural organisations who may benefit from hearing more about the lived experiences of children and young people in rural and island locations. Ongoing review of these mechanisms is important to ensure that they are

incorporating the voices of all children and young people including those who are experiencing poverty and are excluded or hidden for other reasons.

Annex 1: Data sources used by Perth and Kinross Council to monitor child poverty indicators

Source: Perth and Kinross Council (2020)

Indicator	Rationale	Data source
Number and percentage of children living in poverty	This is a reliable measure of poverty as it takes housing into account – families in private rented housing will pay significantly more than those in social housing.	End Child Poverty stats
Most socially and financially challenged households	Useful tool for local identification and analysis using other data to understand poverty related gaps. However overall figure gives a valid headline indicator.	ACORN data held by Perth and Kinross Council
Managing financially	Data is derived from Scottish Household Survey - and provides a broad indication of families who are struggling financially.	Scottish Household Survey
Households with no savings	Data is derived from Scottish Household Survey - and provides a broad indication of families who are struggling financially.	
Earning below the Living Wage	Reliable measure of families in poverty	Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings
Underemployment	A key driver of in-work poverty.	Annual Population Survey (regional employment patterns)
Employment	Reliable measurement of employment rates within local economy.	Labour market profile for Perth and Kinross
Lower paid work	Lower paid work is a key driver of in-work poverty.	
Job density	Indicates whether there are more jobseekers than available jobs.	
Median Gross Weekly Earnings	Measures whether wages are increasing, stagnant or decreasing over time.	
Claimant count	Indicates number and percentage people living on benefit - useful real time indicator to track changes.	
Workless households	Workless Households are at greatest risk of poverty.	
Qualifications	Indicator of educational and skills base - with school-leavers qualifications in the attainment tables.	
Rents	Housing costs are a determinant of family disposable income and poverty.	Private sector rent statistics (Scottish Government)
Income of social renters	Important measurement of affordability of social rented housing.	Social tenants in Scotland (Scottish Government)
Fuel poverty	Energy Efficiency of Homes is an important driver of fuel poverty.	Scottish House Condition Survey (Scottish Government)
Free school meals	Important measurement of child poverty.	School Healthy Living statistics (Scottish Government)
Best Start Grants		Best Start Grant high level statistics (Scottish Government)
Scottish Welfare Fund Applications – Crisis Grants	Indicator of financial resilience of families in poverty.	Scottish Welfare Fund statistics (Scottish Government)
Development Milestones	Important measurement of the impact of child poverty.	Early child development (Public Health Scotland)
Attainment	Reports on closure of attainment gap.	Perth and Kinross Attainment Update
All School Leavers	As measured by Insight total tariff points.	Perth & Kinross Council ECS analytics
Child Protection	Reports on vulnerability: children from poorest SIMD areas 20 more likely to be in child protection system.	Perth and Kinross Child Protection Committee (CPC) Performance Management Information and Statistical Report

Annex 2: Child poverty data available through routine national sources

Source: Public Health Scotland (2021)

Income from employment	Income from social security	Costs of living
Labour market demand (Jobs density, unfilled vacancies)	National source: Families receiving child benefit	Private rental costs (Broad Rental Market Areas)
Wage levels (real living wage, national minimum wage)	National source: Low-income families on Universal Credit (UC) or tax credits	Social rental costs
Barriers to work for parents (based on main benefits claimed)	Households with dependent children and type	Award rates and expenditure (Discretionary Housing Payments)
Children registration (at a local level)	Housing costs support (UC or Housing Benefit)	Help with childcare costs through tax credits or UC
Young adults participating in modern apprenticeships	Scottish Welfare Fund (Expenditure)	% of P4–7 pupils registered taking free meals
Young adults aged 16–19 participating in education, training or employment	Scottish Welfare Fund (Award rate)	Fuel poverty rates (all household)
% of working-age population with no formal qualifications	Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods (Award rate)	
% of random adults in families with children by highest level of qualification	Job Start Payments (Award rate)	
% population leaving school to a positive destination	Deductions from low-income households (DWP)	
% of school leavers by attainment level	Benefits cap (housing benefit or UC)	
% children with developmental concerns at 27–30 months	Financial support for furloughed employees	
% of working-age population with no formal qualifications	Financial support for the self-employed	
% of random adults in families with children by highest level of qualification	Two-child limit (Scotland only)	
Economic development (number of enterprises, gross value added (GVA) per head)		
% of households with dependent children with no access to a car		
% of random adults in households with children who are satisfied with public transport		

Annex 3: Indicators within the PHS child poverty data source that could be analysed at sub-local authority level to inform rural/island responses

Extracted from PHS (2021) – child poverty data source spreadsheet: please refer to the original PHS resource for more detail.

Driver	Category	Indicator	Data source	Analysis level
Population profile	Child poverty	Number and percentage of children in poverty, <i>before housing costs</i>	RAPID (Registration and Population Interaction Database):	Small areas within local authority
	Priority groups	Single parent households (census) Single parent households (tax credits) Single parent households (UC claimants) Households with dependent children claiming UC where someone has a disability (child and/or adult) BME families with dependent children (census) Young mothers (census) Large families (3 or more children) (census)	2011 Census Table DC1201SC	Below local authority
		Single parent households (tax credits)*	HMRC	Local authority summary and small area
		Single parent households (UC claimants)*	DWP	Local authority summary and small area
		Households with dependent children claiming UC where someone has a disability (child and/or adult)	DWP	Below local authority
Income from employment	Barriers to work for parents	Number of households with children where at least one adult claims an out of work benefit**	DWP and HMRC	Small areas within local authority
	Labour market	% Working age population claiming out of work benefits	DWP	Small areas within local authority
Income from social security	Low income families (UC)	Families with children receiving support from Universal Credit	DWP	Small areas within local authority
	Housing costs support (Housing Benefit)	Households with children receiving help with housing costs	DWP (Housing benefit)	Small areas within local authority
	Housing costs support (Universal Credit)	Households with children receiving help with housing costs	DWP (Households on UC)	Small areas within local authority
Cost of living	None noted			

*The data will not include families who choose not to claim.

**The data does not tell us the extent to which health and/or caring responsibilities (or other factors) present a barrier to work for parents claiming UC.

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The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-80435-643-2 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, June 2022

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS1108582 (06/22)

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