Fife Partnership written evidence
Scottish Parliament Social Security Committee
March 2017

Introduction
Child Poverty legislation will ultimately have implications for the people who live in Fife and for community planning partners. We have therefore taken considerable care in reflecting the views of partners and have agreed that there are some key messages that we would want to elevate to sit on top of the responses to the specific questions that are asked by the Social Security Committee.

We have also highlighted some of the work streams that we have invested in or will invest in to illustrate the kind of contribution to tackling child poverty (and all poverty) that is made at a local level.

Key messages
Through discussions to arrive at a shared partnership response a number of key messages emerged. These were -

- The levers to address child poverty are distributed rather than sitting mostly with Scottish Government. Councils and their local partners already do a great deal to tackle child poverty. We want to ensure that this is recognised at a Scottish level.

- With that in mind, we believe that a significant role for Scottish Government should be to provide a framework for tackling child poverty and to work hardest on enabling and supporting local partners to be doing more and / or better. There needs to be a focus on learning from those with the most effective policy and practice and supporting those who are less active or less effective to strengthen their work.

- The Scottish Government wants to especially focus on child poverty within a wider approach to poverty and inequality. We think that even a perception of narrowing on focus could be detrimental to the wider tackling poverty and reducing inequalities outcomes that we are looking to achieve.

- We believe that there is a very good opportunity for us to use rich data and evidence – much of it held locally - to consider new approaches, reconsider targeting and how we can do much more work on early intervention to prevent child poverty and to break cycles. We think that legislation, or its accompanying guidance, should encourage this.

Programmes and projects at a Fife level
We list some programmes and project to illustrate the local contributions to the poverty agenda -

- Seven locally developed and delivered Welfare Reform and anti-poverty action plans, covering the geography of Fife – as part of a localised community planning response;
- support to children and families through their early years;
• a strong focus on raising attainment for children in the most disadvantaged areas;
• addressing the cost of school day;
• parent-led childcare pilots;
• support for lone parents in finding and sustaining employment;
• joint work with the DWP on strengthening communications with those vulnerable to receiving benefit sanctions;
• innovative employability work with children in schools;
• an aspiration to rapidly increase the number of apprenticeships in Fife;
• a holistic approach to delivering the Scottish Welfare Fund including a presence in some food banks on a pilot basis;
• promoting savings and affordable, responsible borrowing through development of the credit union movement and establishing a community development finance institution (CDFI).

Response to specific questions

Question 1

Whether you agree that statutory child poverty targets should be re-introduced for Scotland?

We would agree that there is merit in setting targets. It is vital that child poverty is recognised as a key challenge facing Scottish society, and important that this is reflected in an ambition to eradicate child poverty – encapsulated in a clear national policy, with appropriate legislative support.

We would agree with a position set out in the Scottish Government’s consultation for 2030 deadlines. A 2030 deadline seems sensible given the need to align with timescales set out by a Fairer Scotland approach. It also fits locally in Fife with the work of the Fairer Fife Commission.

These timescales reflect the ambition of the challenge and the significant amount of action and change in culture that needs to be achieved. The targets should reflect a range of non-income measures.

There is also a view stating that child poverty can be alleviated by a given date is a crude fixed target and may be difficult to achieve. With that in mind, it would be important to be explicit on interim targets reflecting milestones on contributory factors.

Question 2

The appropriateness and scope of the 4 proposed targets

We would like to see child poverty targets in use at national and local levels but as part of a suite of poverty and fairness measures.

There are potential issues about how poverty is defined. If measures used are about relative poverty, for example, then that cannot be eradicated. There is also a risk
that a narrow focus on child poverty might miss some of the most vulnerable low income households (without child dependents).

It is important that any targets chosen are based on indicators that can be measured at local authority and sub-local authority level.

Consideration should be given to using the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s (JRF) measures – see its report ‘We Can Solve Poverty in the UK’ (Sept 2016) - which are less arbitrary and less focused on a median UK income. The JRF measure is 75% of the minimum income standard (MIS). The MIS reflects the income required to enable households to meet the costs of basic needs such as food, fuel, transport, household bills, and cultural participation.

It is also important to recognise that although many of the factors and levers to impact on poverty are at UK or international level so income targets set for Scotland have to be caveated. It should be explicit that it is not only public agencies that have leverage on income and others should be drawn into the wider partnership discussion – initiatives such as the Living Wage campaign, drawing in business, are key to this.

Question 3

Whether interim targets are needed

Rather than overly focus on targets we feel that in the early years of a new or enhanced approach to tackling child poverty we concentrate more on ensuring commitment, areas of action and clear approaches to sharing learning across the country. Any ‘targets’ could instead take the form of milestones. For example, that child poverty actions are clearly embedded in community planning partnership plans.

Question 4

The proposed arrangements for reporting progress towards meeting the targets and how best to hold the Scottish Government to account

The intention to match the timing of Delivery Plans to the length of the Scottish Parliamentary term seems sensible.

However, we think that it would be better to have a requirement placed on Scottish Ministers to produce a Reducing Inequality and Poverty Delivery Plan that would include a child poverty priority. That would also square with the intention to establish a national poverty and inequality commission. The Delivery Plan should reflect the pivotal contribution of councils and their local partners.

There may be some benefit in reporting annually but only if the measures chosen to report can actually be shifted in that time frame.

Question 5
The responsibility placed on local councils and health boards to make local progress reports

We think that it is sensible to place a responsibility on local partnerships to make local progress reports. Given that local authorities are most often the lead agents this makes sense that any formal responsibility for ensuring that happens should be placed with them.

We would be most supportive of that joint reporting – as referenced in the Bill – rather than individual reports. But the Bill also implies that the ‘action report’ should detail the actions separately by local authority and Health Board. This seems inappropriate since many actions are taken in partnership and with other players involved.

We have two additional concerns. A report which only asks for a description of actions could be framed around a listing of what is done anyway rather than the Bill / Act prompting new, innovative work with more substantial, sustainable impacts. Secondly, the report asked for is entirely retrospective (on the previous year) – should there not be a need to identify emerging priorities? The Bill as it stands could simply be encouraging stand-still.

Question 6

The existing Child Poverty Measurement Framework and its 37 indicators

We think it is opportune to revisit the framework and consider what measures are needed.

We feel that the framework gives a lot of attention to deficits rather than assets. What are children able to do? What are their aspirations? How can we as the wider society in Scotland help them fulfil their ambitions regardless of income? What do children say about where they grow up? What would they do to enhance their environment?

Question 7

Although not in this Bill, the Scottish Government has committed to establishing a national poverty and inequality commission. What should this commission’s status and powers be in relation to this Bill?

It would be useful to have a cross-sectoral group monitoring progress on child poverty but in the context of a future life for children in Scotland which helps them fulfil their aspirations regardless of background.

Question 8

Any other issues you think are relevant to this Bill?
(1) Over recent years, Scotland has taken significant steps towards improving the way that public services support our children and young people, moving from traditional models of working (based on distinct, professional silos, which focused narrowly on particular aspects of a child’s needs) to a more holistic approach with the child at the centre. The adoption of the GIRFEC approach, and strong support for a partnership approach to children’s services has been central to achieving this change.

It is important that our national approach to eradicating child poverty supports this child-centred, partnership approach to the whole child. It will need to recognise the many ways that poverty affects the lives of children and young people, within the family, the household and the local community.

It is also important to recognise that too often the experience of poverty follows a repeated cycle, of which the child’s experience is only a part. Successfully tackling child poverty will require interventions throughout this cycle of poverty. As such it will be important for a national approach to eradicating child poverty to be located within a wider framework for tackling poverty.

(2) There is also a risk that a narrow focus on child poverty might miss some of the most vulnerable low income households. If poverty and inequality are more effectively tackled at national and community planning partnership level for all households in poverty and at risk of poverty, then that will act to lower child poverty. It is important that we see poverty from a children’s perspective but not to limit our approaches and investment decisions.

(3) Scottish Government should provide data on income and other economic and social measures at sub-local levels such as Office National Statistics is committing to doing in England and Wales (small area income and poverty estimates). This would allow local authorities and partners to target provision and consider behavioural approaches to tackling poverty.