

Karen Adam MSP
Convener
Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Committee
Email: ehrcj.committee@parliament.scot

9th January 2025

Dear Ms Adam,

Inquiry into Rurality

The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

Our [Taking Action on Rural Poverty](https://www.povertyalliance.org/taking-action-on-rural-poverty/) project¹ aims to shine a light on the experience of people living on low incomes in rural and island Scotland and struggling with the unjust additional cost of living. We are working in two pilot areas, Argyll and Bute and Aberdeenshire to:

- Support Citizens Panels of people with lived experience to share their expertise and connect to decision makers;
- Build local anti-poverty networks, working with the third sector, community groups and local authorities; and
- Fund two test of change projects – practical interventions aimed at reducing the cost of living for rural and island communities

This submission has been informed by our participation and engagement work with these Citizens Panels and anti-poverty networks, as well as expertise of the Poverty Alliance's rural and island members. It also draws on, and encloses, a report written by the Poverty Alliance in our role as secretariat to the Cross Party Group on Poverty in the Scottish Parliament, the culmination of that group's inquiry into rural poverty.

Human rights and poverty in rural and island Scotland

Poverty represents a fundamental barrier to the enjoyment of human rights. It directly affects people's ability to realise rights to an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing, food, clothing and heating. In rural and island Scotland, these rights challenges are intensified as a result of significantly higher living costs, longer distances to essential services and limited choices. This also means that, while headline poverty rates can appear

¹ <https://www.povertyalliance.org/taking-action-on-rural-poverty/>

lower than in urban areas, income-based measures obscure this lived reality and its impacts. It is therefore crucial, both for tackling poverty and for realising rights, that Government takes into account the higher cost of living rurally in its anti-poverty and broader policy making.

The role of public services in preventing and alleviating poverty

The inquiry has noted significant inequalities in access to services in rural and island Scotland. Public services are a critical mechanism through which rights are realised and poverty is prevented. Through our work with members and communities across Scotland, The Poverty Alliance consistently hears that accessible, high-quality public services are among the most important factors in preventing poverty and reducing its impacts. High-quality, accessible public services reduce household costs, support participation in work and community life, and provide essential protection for people when incomes are low or unstable.

Inadequate access to public services can compound poverty by increasing costs, for example in forcing people to travel long distances to access essential services like healthcare or education. From a rights perspective, the availability, accessibility and quality of public services must be ensured for all, regardless of geography. This requires deliberate action to design and fund services in ways that reflect rural realities rather than treating rural provision as an exception or add-on.

Key barriers faced by people in poverty in rural and island Scotland

Through our research, policy work and lived experience engagement, The Poverty Alliance has identified a range of interconnected barriers faced by people living on low incomes in rural and island Scotland that undermine their rights. We would urge the Committee to give focus to these key barriers in your inquiry.

Fuel poverty is one of the most acute challenges. Rural and island households are significantly more likely to experience fuel poverty, and to experience it more severely. This is driven by lower and more volatile incomes, poor-quality and energy-inefficient housing, harsher climates, and higher energy prices. Many homes are off the gas grid and reliant on electricity or heating oil, with heating oil requiring large upfront payments that are difficult to manage on low incomes. The result is that people are forced to ration heat, with serious consequences for health, wellbeing and dignity.

Access to healthcare is another critical issue. While healthcare is free at the point of use, the cost and logistics of getting to appointments are a major barrier in rural areas. Long travel distances, limited or non-existent public transport, and poor coordination between transport and health services mean that attending routine or specialist appointments can involve significant expense, time off work and, in some cases, overnight stays. These barriers disproportionately affect older people, disabled people and those with long-term conditions, undermining the right to health in practice.

Poor transport underpins many other challenges. Limited, infrequent and unreliable public transport increases isolation and forces households into car dependency. For people on low incomes, this can add substantial weekly costs and restrict access to work, education, healthcare, childcare and food. Community transport often fills vital gaps, but is frequently insecurely funded and marginal to strategic transport planning, despite its importance to rights realisation.

Housing is a further area of concern. Rural and island areas face higher housing costs, limited availability of social and affordable housing, and poorer housing quality. Insecure

private renting, second homes and short-term lets can drive up prices and reduce supply for local people. Poor housing conditions contribute directly to fuel poverty and ill health. Access to secure, genuinely affordable housing is a cornerstone of the right to an adequate standard of living, yet remains out of reach for many rural households.

Food access is also more challenging in rural areas. Limited local retail options, higher prices, reduced choice and the need to travel long distances to affordable shops all increase the cost of food. For people on low incomes, this can mean relying on more expensive local provision or incurring additional transport costs, increasing the risk of food insecurity and undermining the right to adequate food.

The rural premium and the cost of living as a core rights issue

A core thread running through all of these challenges, highlighted repeatedly through The Poverty Alliance's work and through evidence to the CPG on Poverty, is the rural premium: the unavoidable additional cost of living associated with living in rural and island communities. Evidence shows that households in rural and island Scotland require significantly higher incomes to achieve a minimum acceptable standard of living than their urban counterparts, with uplifts of between 15% and 30% depending on household type and location.

If Scotland is serious about progressive realisation of human rights, action on the cost of living must be at the centre of our approach to rights realisation in rural and island areas. This means explicitly recognising and reducing the rural premium through targeted measures on energy costs, transport, housing, and service provision. It also means embedding a robust rural and island lens across policy-making, informed by lived experience. The absence of a consistent rural lens across policy-making risks creating a two-tier experience of rights, where people in urban areas are better able to access entitlements and public services than those living elsewhere.

We hope this brief submission, alongside the enclosed CPG on Poverty report on rural poverty, assists the Committee in its inquiry.

Yours sincerely

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