

Child Poverty and Parental Employment Inquiry

Committee Visit to North Ayrshire

Friday 13 January 2023

Committee Members in attendance: Natalie Don, Jeremy Balfour, Paul McLennan

Update on Tackling Child Poverty & Cost of Living Board: Irvine

In June 2022, North Ayrshire Council established a Child Poverty and Cost of Living Board, led by the Leader of the Council, to reduce child poverty.

The following overview was provided:

- North Ayrshire has the second highest level of child poverty in Scotland.
- Child poverty statistics had to be caveated due to the COVID 19 pandemic but are sitting between 28.9% and 24.5%.
- A shift had been noted with the introduction of the Scottish Child Payment (SCP) and through partnership working, though it was emphasised that every intervention is crucial in tackling child poverty.
- The local authority had used local resources to make direct interventions by providing extra £100 payments on top of the Scottish Government's Scottish Child Payment bridging payments for older children.
- Board Members considered it key for families to have control over their own resources with money going to their pockets directly (e.g. the £100 bridging payments at holiday periods, including Christmas).
- Although North Ayrshire Council is praised for good practice it was noted that current work was not making the difference needed.
- In June 2022, the Council established a Child Poverty and Cost of Living Board led by the Leader of the Council to drive change and provide a quick decision-making forum to deliver change.
- The Board has a co-production approach and has identified 4 themes to complete mini-inquiries and develop action plans for:
 - No Wrong Door (Accessing Services)
 - Employability
 - Food
 - Island poverty
- The biggest issue for the Council is access to data to help those that are not presenting for assistance. They are currently working with the

Scottish Government and the Improvement Service to have DWP data shared.

- Stigma can be a barrier to requesting help.
- The Council is working with young people and their families and now have Welfare Rights/Money Advice Officers in every secondary school.
- The Council is currently undertaking a review of financial inclusion, this will develop an updated financial inclusion strategy.
- Services and partners are increasingly supporting new families however there are some families who need continued support.
- Some families are increasingly moving into poverty and not engaging with services: That is where the 'no wrong door approach' is important to address all needs and provide sustainable outcomes not just provide crisis intervention supports.

Roundtable discussion- Local Employability Partnership (LEP): Irvine

The LEP include key stakeholders working together to improve skills for employment and reduce unemployment for citizens of North Ayrshire.

The discussion identified the following barriers and challenges for North Ayrshire:

- Transport is a barrier to obtaining advice. Some areas are not well served by public transport and petrol is expensive.
- Importance of No Wrong Door Approach. Turning away clients could see them not getting the help they need. Some may have needed to make an effort to get transport (as North Ayrshire can be rural) to the service or saved to pay for fuel if travelling by car.
- People taking tough decisions on whether they can afford to take the bus to get advice or buy food.
- There has been an increase in people seeking help with energy rebates, particularly those in the private rented sector.
- North Ayrshire has identified 6 localities and takes an asset-based approach to addressing deprivation in communities, including the creation of neighbourhood hubs to meet residents' needs.
- In discussion about training and monitoring of the No Wrong Door Approach, Committee Members were advised that NHS workers, including health visitors, got training on financial inclusion and asked wider questions to identify who is best placed to provide support. The ongoing Financial Inclusion Review, including Money Matters and Better Off North Ayrshire, helps the Council to take a joined-up holistic approach.
- Importance of community volunteers and leaders who are closer to the issues and can take a localised, less stigmatised approach, e.g., by arranging fun activities for families which helps get conversations started about needs.
- Strategic leaders within the CPP take part in a shadowing programme to get a better understanding of community needs.

- Services are seeing new families come forward looking for help to heat their homes and feed their children.
- It was noted that economic inactivity could partly be because of structural issues, such as childcare and transport. Health is a key factor and the ADG SALUS initiative is designed to address health inequalities in relation to work.
- Childcare is a “real challenge” for families, with some paying £300/week. Some parents do not meet the eligibility criteria for a 2-year-old ELC placement or childcare is not available to meet their employment hours.
- Reconsideration of eligibility criteria could be helpful as some families are just above the financial thresholds for eligibility and are often the same families who are not eligible for any other benefits (despite requiring additional support).
- It was too early to say if there is confusion over the split delivery of social security benefits. The Contact Centre and Customer Services in the Council are good at navigating benefit systems, the main issue currently is the increase in the volume of requests for assistance.
- People need money in their pockets. Those families just outwith eligibility criteria for benefits are the most likely to struggle.
- Difficult to take a long-term view and make transformational change without multi-year funding to support strategic planning and long-term view. It can take a year to build relationships of trust and people can get jaded. Multi year funding is needed for local authorities and voluntary sector.
- The flexibility of funding during COVID and light touch monitoring have been very helpful and such an approach going forward would be useful.
- Ayrshire College suggested a minimum of 3 years funding is needed to do any long-term planning with funding allocations announced in January.
- Ayrshire College works closely with the Council and the LEP. It provides adult modern apprenticeships to work towards an SVQ. Workplace-based learning takes away the stigma of learning in college.
- Ayrshire College says people need to be able to get back into careers, not just any job. Courses should be designed around what people need and not just looking at how many people attend classes. Also, important to look at smaller classes and outreach in localities.
- Skills Development Scotland (SDS) works in schools to help transition to work etc.
- SDS noted that 19- to 20-year-olds in transition phase need assistance planning a career as they have fewer opportunities and may have been out of work for longer. They use a coaching model and one to ones and identify the individuals who will need more support.
- SDS says constant engagement, data sharing and working closely in partnership is key.
- Post COVID young people have suffered from a lack of engagement, motivation, confidence and attendance at school.
- It was noted that schools are data rich and how this is shared is a key priority.

- In relation to economic regeneration, it was noted that there are 3,000 employers on the database. New initiatives and incentives are developed and piloted regularly with best practice shared with other employers.
- Ayrshire Growth Deal is providing £5m to work towards a healthy economy.

We Work for Families (meeting with parents and keyworkers): Ardrossan

North Ayrshire Council's Employability Service: Your Next Move, Working North Ayrshire delivers a range of employability services, including We Work for Families which is contracted to the Lennox Partnership to deliver targeted support for parents.

Overview of the We Work for Families project

- The purpose of We Work for Families (WWFF) is to deliver tailored support, focus on removing barriers (i.e., tackling debt and energy poverty) to enable parents to attend training, employment, and education.
- Its success lies in a robust referral process from its partners, i.e., health visitors and referring on for additional support. An action plan is set up at the client's first appointment. The project empowers parents to get to a positive destination.
- WWFF delivered a successful pilot in an Ardrossan Nursery and delivers the service across North Ayrshire. Saltcoats has the highest deprivation levels. Large employers like ICI and Hunterston have closed, and now there are many small employers.
- A big part of the project's approach is to build confidence, so that parents see work and a career as a realistic possibility.
- Childcare is a 'massive issue'. Most parents need to find work that fits with school hours – "golden hours of Monday to Friday 10 till 2".

Parents attending the meeting explained how the project had helped them. Below are some examples:

Example 1: Applying to college

One parent explained how, after getting pregnant she left employment. Then lockdown happened and being a lone parent made it difficult to get back into work. The cost of childcare made it difficult. She got a job in retail, but then that ended with the second lockdown. Through WWFF she has applied to college and hopes to eventually progress to doing an HNC and in the future wants to become a Mental Health Nurse. Childcare provided with the college place makes it possible.

Next year she will get '3-year-old hours', but now she gets no funded hours as she is just above the threshold for 2-year-old hours. Evening classes worked best for her informal childcare arrangement.

Working with her keyworker at WWfF has improved her confidence. She is the class representative, the Student Wellbeing Ambassador and is taking part in the Citizen's Panel on Health and Social Care, things she never thought she would be doing. She said she "found going back to college scarier than having a child" though now she can envisage a future career that she would never have attempted otherwise. The approach of the project workers was crucial; "you're not pushy like the job centre."

Example 2: Pilot – Working with the council

This parent explained how she had been out of work since 2020 and had not been considering going back to work, but through a pilot scheme she had trained as a care worker and was employed by the council. An important part of this was that she got a 3-month travel pass so she can get to work. (This was a one-off intervention provided through Covid Recovery Funding for active travel which has supported 78 parents in North Ayrshire). She has been working for 3 months and her confidence has grown hugely.

Example 3: Pilot – Skills for life (admin)

This parent, who has seven children and has not worked for 20 years, is starting college as part of the 'skills for life (admin) project' which will involve a 'mentored placement' with the council. Again, the travel pass has made this possible. The placement fits with school hours. She said, "doing this is frightening but with support its manageable". Her husband is also receiving support.

Example 4: Complex families

This parent has a lot of family issues and has had difficulty getting support for her children's additional support needs. WWFF has helped source support when "everyone else flings me from pillar to post". Despite these challenges this parent has remained in employment, with the support of her keyworker. The project worker referred to how the Named Person service had been implemented locally which makes it easier to join up support and share data.

Example 5: Working with WWFF

This parent was referred by her health visitor and now works for WWFF. A key part of this was the offer of a job with flexible hours and providing a travel pass. The project also helped with her energy bill debt.

Keyworkers attending the meeting explained some of the challenges and support measures they can offer:

- Keyworkers advised they had good relationships with nurseries in the area, so were able to help parents to find more flexible childcare to meet their needs if they were eligible for '2-year-old' hours.
- Childcare is an issue for 80% of parents they work with. Some working parents on low income do not get support because they are just over the threshold, but they can be the ones needing support most.

- Men make up approximately 30% of their caseload, this has risen from 20%.
- A lot of parents do not have access to digital devices to undertake education/training. WWFF has secured 147 devices through Connecting Scotland. Now this funding stream has closed WWFF are working with retailers to fill the gap.
- They hope funding through Best Start, Bright Futures will fund WWFF to create a development plan. Currently recruiting 12 new staff.
- WWFF staff were passionate about their work and helping parents. Some parents do not want to work when they first register. Staff need to build a rapport and help them get over hurdles and find themselves as a person again and not just a parent.

Fair Work Employer, CHAP: Ardrossan

Ayrshire Growth Deal's Community Wealth Building Project includes Fair Work Ayrshire which supports employers to provide flexible and fair work with parents considered a key priority group. A local employer CHAP attended with the Fair Work Ayrshire Manager to discuss the role of employers in improving outcomes for parents.

- CHAP was established 22 years ago and offers free, independent advice and information relating to housing, welfare rights and debt issues. All services provided ensure that people are not disadvantaged through a lack of knowledge or awareness about their rights. They worked with over 800 clients in the last operational year and achieved £1.9m in financial gains for clients.
- Fair Work Ayrshire/Ayrshire Growth Deal Community Wealth Building works with local employers to promote flexible and family friendly working.
- They carry out an assessment of employers and what their needs are. Most employers are small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). 10% of employers have under 5 employees, 10-15% are larger employers, with the bulk of employers having 250 employees.
- It is recognised that smaller employers may not be able to make changes as quickly as larger employers. They are provided tailored support to meet their needs and circumstances.
- Encourage employers to engage with volunteering to help people gain skills to get back into work.
- Sustainability of employment is down to "flexibility around the school gate".
- On barriers to gaining work with fair work employers, it was considered that early education of young people on what a good employer looks like is key.
- Embedding financial inclusion, by addressing the transition from benefits to work should be a priority, as losing benefits can deter people from working because of the additional costs incurred. People also need assistance with debt as that can be a barrier to people entering employment as they fear that their wages could be arrested.

Parental Employment Support Provision: Irvine

North Ayrshire Council's Employability Service: Your Next Move, Working North Ayrshire delivers a range of employability services, including We Work for Families, but there are also additional programmes to support positive outcomes for parents.

Practitioners attended to present on further support offered to parents in North Ayrshire

- Skills for Life can support lone parents into employment. It offers 26-week mentored placements with the council. Sustainability rates are high as people are still in employment after 5 years, this is offered across various council departments. Skills for Life is being developed and this approach will be piloted with a focus on administration careers with the NHS, police and locally based anchor institutions. Pre-employment training to prepare parents for this paid work experience started in January and parents will also work towards an SVQ level 2 administration during their placement. Most parents completing any of the Skills for Life programmes are offered a job at the end of the 6-month paid placement.
- Recently, a Care at Home pilot has offered flexible hours for parents resulting in attracting parents to work in the care sector. This opportunity provides support for parents to do care work with the council. Pre-employment support is given to address council tax and in-work benefits issues and childcare. Shift work can be an issue and flexible hours offering day shifts only to parents has been a successful element for this.
- CEIS (Community Enterprise in Scotland) North Ayrshire delivers an end-to-end service within the 'employability pipeline', taking referrals mainly from DWP, but also through word of mouth. They work with all ages and stages, though tends to be those parents closer to the job market. Each client has a key worker who addresses barriers and develops an action plan. Support continues once parents find employment - they provide in-work support for a year. They have supported at least 4,000 people. CEIS works with Skills for Life to provide, for example, digital training. Mainly works with the long-term unemployed individuals.
- Equal Programme works with disabled clients – mostly young people between the ages of 16-20 years who are supported by a transitions officer, who will attend parent teacher reviews. Of 18 clients, 9 started work and the others started college. Some of those participants are undertaking an SVQ in horticulture. They also support parents.
- Childcare and travel are big issues for this client group.

- The Programme hopes to do more work with parents of disabled children having supported some parents to get jobs working from home. Mental health and money worries are an issue for parents, some young people on the Programme have referred their parents for support.
- Working for a Healthy Economy, delivered by NHS SALUS provides health supports for employed and unemployed people. They can refer to specialist health support to get best health interventions, such as specialist counselling or hypnotherapy. People will have an allocated case manager and tailor the process to individual needs. They offer support face to face and over the telephone (preferred by those in work) and use a range of clinical tools. SALUS are embedding in the 'employment pipeline' so people can access this health support while accessing employability support to secure or retain employment. This intervention is funded through the Ayrshire Growth Deal.

Final discussion

Members asked whether a formal, external evaluation has been undertaken. The North Ayrshire LEP would welcome support from the Scottish Government to undertake evaluations as it was difficult to take resource away from services to re-direct to evaluation activity.

The Council is about to commission an evaluation of the Ayrshire Growth Deal Project; Working for a Healthy Economy which will consider the links with the Employability Services and keyworker support across Ayrshire.

Members asked about reasons for economic inactivity. A workshop with the Scottish Government was held to consider reasons for economic inactivity in Ayrshire as part of the Ayrshire Growth Deal revenue projects, this will be explored further in partnership with the Government and Public Health Scotland.

Members asked if it would be helpful if people were able to keep their sickness benefits when they start work. "That would make a huge difference". (NB this has been trialled as a possible UK government change).

Members also asked if employability requirements could be worked into planning consents for large developments. North Ayrshire LEP explained that they have a 'community benefits officer' to ensure contractors deliver what was agreed. This is part of their 'community wealth building' approach.

North Ayrshire LEP concluded by noting that the council has a strong partnership approach, however the impact of covid and cost of living, single year funding and problems with data sharing are the key challenges.