

Social Justice and Social Security Committee

Child Poverty Statistics

Home-Start UK Response

Theme 1: Child poverty statistics for Scotland

1. What do you think are the key reasons the interim targets have been missed?

In short: For the poorest in society, costs for families remains too high, and income remains too low.

The cost-of-living crisis has embedded problems for families already struggling after the impacts of Covid-19.

It is now not only families with three or more children who are struggling but also families with just one child. The impact that Home-Starts are seeing are the profound negative toll on parent's mental health and wellbeing and their ability to parent their children in a nurturing and attuned manner.

Home-Starts are seeing:

- More families experiencing 'in work poverty' particularly those with two or more children.
- Families are finding it harder to afford the basics (food, heating costs), they are increasingly relying on foodbanks and not using their heating.
- Housing Instability: Some families are struggling to pay rent or mortgages, increasing the risk of eviction or homelessness. Others live in unsatisfactory or overcrowded conditions.
- Education Challenges: Families find it hard to afford school supplies, extra-curricular activities, or transportation, impacting children's opportunities and development.
- Increased Reliance on Credit: To cope with rising costs, some families have turned to credit cards or bank loans, leading to debt and long-term financial instability.
- The complexity of the families that Home-Starts are supporting has increased. This severely limits the numbers of families that they can support at one time.
- Families are struggling with the affordability and availability of childcare. Many families cannot access Early Learning & Childcare funded childcare places either due to the lack of provision, accessing provision where it is not local to them as there is no commitment for it to be provided locally, or the affordability of provision if they aren't eligible for funded places

All the issues outlined are leading to heightened anxiety and stress in families and having an impact on children's outcomes.

More generally there is a lack of holistic support in our communities and statutory services are seeing budgets cuts and their services reduced. Sustainable, community-based services that not only support families, but that can connect families into grants and services which address poverty are at risk, particularly where funding is only allocated year on year.

Rural poverty

One colleague who works in a Home-Start covering a large rural community told us that families face unique challenges.

- There is no public transport or, if there is, it's very sporadic and expensive.
- Families must shop locally, so can't visit big supermarkets which tend to be cheaper and so food shopping is more expensive for them.
- Many families must heat their homes with oil. On average the minimum delivery of 500 litres of oil costs around £850. This will last between six and eight weeks and the cost can't be spread.

Urban poverty

Those Home-Starts that manage Home-Starts that cover urban communities are working in areas that often experience higher unemployment rates and have a greater dependence on benefits.

- They are supporting more families with no recourse to public funds
- More families are living in temporary accommodation and needing to travel distances to get to nursery/school/services
- Cost of public transport has increased so that a family now commuting to and from nursery could spend more than £492 annually
- There is less public housing, so families are needing to engage with the private rental market, often at the whim of unethical landlords

2. What impact has Scottish Government policy had on the change in child poverty?

Home-Start welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to reducing child poverty. It is important that targets are set and that we can judge progress, and identify things that work, and those that have less impact than we might have expected.

While the interim targets have not been met, rates of child poverty overall have fallen. However, this isn't the case for families with children under the age of one, which is a large proportion of the families that Home-Starts work with.

The Scottish Child Payment has been a successful policy for putting money directly in the pockets of low-income families and increasing their income.

We are also pleased that the Scottish Government plans to mitigate the two-child limit and the Scottish Government should fulfil this commitment.

Theme 2: Next child poverty delivery plan

1. When preparing the next delivery plan, what lessons can be drawn from the work of local, 'place based' organisations and their approach to tackling child poverty?

Successful collaboration to reach communities

Across Scotland there are good examples of collaboration and cross sector working. This should be encouraged and expanded. The third, or voluntary sector, has shown that it can help to reach families in priority groups, and can deliver the trusted support and services that people feel able to engage with, and that will connect them to other services.

This best practice should be highlighted and learnt from.

Home-Start is the only national network tasked specifically with a remit for intervention in the early years, one of the six priority groups identified in the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan.

Over the past 50 years, in communities across Scotland and the rest of the UK, Home-Start has shown the value of individual, home-based support for those families that other services often do not reach.

Home-Start has shown the value of voluntary, and often volunteer led, relational support based around the needs of the family in building up trust and helping families to access other services.

Examples of what can be delivered

Home-Starts have successfully adapted support and created new services to help families cope with the rising cost-of-living and the impact of poverty.

Examples of services being delivered by Home-Starts in Scotland, which show what can be achieved when partners collaborate include:

- The Fairer Aberdeen Fund is funding Home-Start Aberdeen to support families in "priority neighbourhoods" of Aberdeen which have the highest Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) scores. This support is being expanded in 25/26.
- One Home-Start runs four warm place hubs which provide a warm welcome, place to meet others for peer support, have something warm to eat and drink and where children can play and socialise with others.
- One Home-Start provides their staff team and volunteers with training from Nationwide Building Society which included: how to address and manage debt, budgeting, income maximisation, energy efficiency and tools to support families experiencing financial issues.
- Another Home-Start has developed a partnership with the Citizen's Advice Bureau designed to remove the barriers to families being able to access the support that they require. Rather than families having to ring and speak to a

stranger the Home-Start arranges joint home visits - to ensure that families get the help and support they need in a way that is friendly and accessible to them.

Delivering holistic and whole family support to improve outcomes and wellbeing and enable families to better engage with other services that directly increase their incomes. This includes through action focused on preventing families falling into poverty and wider community-based support.

Taking a wide focus to reducing poverty

It is important not to make the focus on reducing poverty so narrow that it looks only at changes that will directly increase income.

Concerted work regarding the employability pipeline is essential to address child poverty and understanding that the steps that precede this pipeline, where parents' mental and physical wellbeing is improved to increase readiness for work, is vital.

Through improved mental and physical health, and increased social connection, not only is readiness for employability increased, the capacity for nurturing relationships that give children what they need to grow and develop well. This is the core work of the Home-Start network.

Organisations like Home-Start, that improve parental capacity and early childhood relationships as their primary focus, also play a major role in delivering outcomes that can improve access to employment and reduce poverty.

Similarly, Government must also focus on the benefits that improving public services and amenities will have on poverty and on parental capacity to support their children.

For example, access to free, or affordable, family friendly spaces like parks, libraries, museums, or swimming pools are not anti-poverty tools, but by improving connectivity and community among parents and children it will improve mental health and wellbeing and help to improve parents' ability to increase their income.

Conversely, parents who are isolated and disconnected from their community, with no affordable transport and nowhere to go with their children, face increased pressures on their mental health – especially if they are already struggling with the pressures of the cost of living.

A poverty reduction strategy should not only consider the tools it has in isolation. All government decisions – both local and national – should be assessed on the impact they have on poverty both and on those living in poverty. Both directly and indirectly.

Using the third sector's experience and insight

Third Sector and voluntary organisations have vital insight into the changing situations of the communities they work with, and this insight should be used as part of shaping services and responses at all levels. For example, Home-Starts have seen a significant increase in poverty and financial challenges in the families they work with, and we have adapted services in response.

However, many local organisations with the most practical experience of working with families are small, with very limited capacity to engage with formal consultations, especially on tight deadlines. Ways must be developed to make meaningful consultation and information gathering easier for all organisations, no matter the size.

A genuine partnership with funding to match

Home-Start's experience has shown that there can be successful collaboration between the third sector and statutory services. However, this collaboration needs to be based on strong and trusting relationships and needs to be well-aligned.

We must move away from examples where third sector organisations are seen as “lesser” partners and are expected to “fit in” to the statutory work.

But most importantly, voluntary services require sustainable and predictable funding. Where funding is cut locally and services are reduced or closed entirely, this destroys trust within target communities and increases feelings of isolation.

Funding decisions taken too late, cause just as much disruption. Without the security of timely decisions, organisations are forced to prepare by considering reductions in staff, or by not renewing contracts. Faced with uncertainty, experienced staff leave the knowledge and relationships that form the core of so much of the work is lost.

Too often funders, both private and statutory, refuse to fund “ongoing” or “core” work, preferring to support new projects or growth. Organisations that have a track record of delivering high quality services can face incredible challenges to attract funding to support their core, ongoing work.

The third sector can play an important role in supporting families facing poverty, and in reducing child poverty. However, we must be funded sustainably, and at a level that allows organisations to carry out their work.