

# **Scottish Parliament Social Justice and Social Security Committee**

## **Post Legislative Scrutiny of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017**

### **Written submission by the Public Health Department, NHS Ayrshire and Arran, September 2024**

#### **Key questions**

- 1. The Act introduced a statutory framework for reducing child poverty. What difference has that framework made to the way the Scottish Government has approached reducing child poverty?**

Child poverty targets, delivery plans and reporting requirements are underpinned by the legislative framework in the Act.

The Act sets out ambitious targets relating to the eradication of child poverty. It is apparent when looking at the annual reports against these measures that more needs to be done, as limited progress has been made and it appears the interim targets are unlikely to be achieved by the end of 2024 (interim targets are for the financial year starting 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023). As progress against targets are published a year behind the reporting figures, this means data regarding the interim targets will be available by end March 2025.

While some SG efforts have been noticeable i.e. changes to social security payments, increase to the Scottish Child Payment and ongoing commitment to NOLB, other areas for action have not been as visible i.e. accessible and affordable childcare (especially for parents who may not work normal office hours and require more flexible childcare) and efforts to provide more affordable housing and ensure current housing is fit for purpose in terms of energy usage, structural soundness and access to transport links and services.

Furthermore, much activity tends to be mitigation rather than long term commitments to prevention and eradication of child poverty.

It is unclear whether the lack of progress is affected by UK Government, Scottish Government, Local Government or a mix of all of these. However, it is clear that only so much change can be affected at a local level if the national policy and resourcing is not adequate.

We appreciate the level of awareness raising the Act and subsequent delivery plans has resulted in across the whole system identifying the wide range of determinants that impact on child poverty. More visibility and capacity building at a local level regarding the whole system efforts would be welcome i.e. the cash first approach strategy to ending the need for food banks and how this can support local efforts.

While at a local level, authorities are expected to look across their own budgets and prioritise accordingly this can only go so far when national issues such as means testing, in work poverty and sanctions continue to affect families.

Ultimately, we feel that the national efforts and cross-government policies are where the real change needs to happen. However, we realise that in this time of budget constraints in many cases this ultimately results in 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' and that shifting resources into one policy area may ultimately remove resource from another.

While the Poverty and Inequality Commission are in place with the role of 'providing independent advice to Scottish Ministers on poverty and inequality; monitoring progress; and proposing solutions to reduce poverty and inequality in Scotland' it is unclear what this might actually mean for Ministers and Government should the targets not be met. What will the resulting action be should the interim targets not be met and how will this further influence the policy direction in Scotland towards the 2030 targets?

As annual funding opportunities and new pathfinders are still coming through to local areas we would welcome a stock take and identification of how to apply the learning from these pathfinders and short term funded projects across Scotland. For example, the development of the child poverty dashboard in Glasgow being replicated for other authorities.

## **2. What difference has the statutory framework made to the way local authorities and health boards have approached reducing child poverty?**

The implementation of LCPARs and a joint duty on LA and NHS aims to ensure that regular review of activity and forward planning takes place in each LA area. At a local level we continue to work towards activities being evidence based and / or properly evaluated to identify whether they should continue and what learning can be shared with other areas but acknowledge more of this can be done at both a national and local level to ensure that the activities being progressed are the right ones for families.

We truly appreciate the inclusion of lived and living experience in informing action at both a local and national level and will welcome the continuation and development of this as vital in influencing what actually makes a difference to families affected by poverty and low incomes. The wider impacts of poverty such as the education gap, access to sport and other activities and stigma ultimately influence children and families across the life course.

We would welcome further action to build capacity of local authorities and Boards to improve the monitoring and evaluation sections of their LCPARs. Perhaps adding examples of good practice in relation to utilising evidence and carrying out evaluation to the guidance document.

Reporting can be onerous due to the annual reporting requirements which has the potential to take time away from activities to complete annual reports. Rather than these intensive annual reporting requirements a shift to less regular full reports with brief annual updates might be a welcome alternative. However, it is acknowledged as this is part of legislation there may be restrictions on what changes to the process can be made. While Local Authorities take the lead role as part of the joint duty, it

should be noted the impact on Health Boards who work to a number of authority areas and are therefore required to work to different structures, reporting procedures and also various demographic and socio-economic landscapes.

As previously noted, we are uncertain what powers local authorities have to truly affect change. How do they manage already tight budgets while responding to national and local priorities as well as community pressures regarding their needs and wants.

At a local level money has to come from other policy areas to fund child poverty activities, this is unlikely to improve how we ultimately work with communities and TSI colleagues to tackle this issue.

Since the pandemic we have seen a shift to emergency food provision and emergency funds, however, we would welcome consideration of how the Act and future delivery plans can tackle this covid legacy.

The introduction of annual reporting has hopefully ensured that all local authorities are working to a similar standard to tackle child poverty and ensuring a set minimum effort. To date, informal feedback has been provided on LCPARs, we would welcome the consideration of more formal feedback / scoring of these reports to formalise the expectations on local authorities and Boards and provide a means of showing any improvements in relation to local action and reporting. Furthermore, it continues to be recognised that while much activity is taking place at a population level, more can be done with regards to priority groups and through application of proportionate universalism principles.

More awareness raising and evidence briefing sessions on how can local areas be sure the actions they are taking will directly influence the national targets, local flexibility would be welcome i.e. providing interactive learning on the evidence identified by SG. Some standardisation of expectations on local areas may further help and also assist in standardised reporting and comparisons i.e. these are the three things you can do against each driver to have the biggest impact for priority families.

More timely data at a more localised level would also assist local areas in targeting efforts effectively in real time. Something similar to the Glasgow dashboard being available for other areas would be welcome.

### **3. What difference has having the targets, delivery plans and reporting requirements built into the Act made at a national level?**

Having the targets did set out an ambition, however as annual monitoring of these show, the level of mitigation and prevention are not at the level required to truly affect change. As we draw closer to the interim target deadline and the figures do not look positive this may also have the risk of causing complacency in terms of people feeling these aren't going to be met no matter what is now done.

While the stagnation of child poverty figures is extremely disappointing it is hoped that this can be turned into a positive with more concentrated efforts as outlined in

the First Minister's speech in April where he set out the Government's priorities and the main focus of Government being the eradication of child poverty and more recently in the priorities identified in this year's Programme for Government.

It should be questioned whether the complete eradication of poverty is actually achievable. Alongside efforts to tackle and eradicate child poverty we would welcome more focus on understanding that poverty isn't just an absence of income, food and heat, it is also an absence of relationships and opportunities. The impacts of which play out across the life course.

Furthermore, it is imperative that we create a culture of safety in the context of poverty, understanding resilience and supporting the cultures and practices that allow people to make the most of constrained resources without blame or stigma. This can only happen through safe and trusting relationships with services and systems. We need to accept and develop a system that understands poverty and low income as a system issue and not that a family are unable to cope, or even worse this resulting in a child protection issue.

This is now also perhaps the time to ask whether these are still the right targets or are there lower level / more granular measures that could be used to identify where the issues are that could be affecting any progress against the four targets. Are the way targets are measured i.e. material deprivation still valid? Looking at a national figure also doesn't demonstrate the pockets of deep poverty that exists across Scotland.

**4. The Act set up several scrutiny measures. How effective have these been?**

We welcome the creation of the Poverty and Inequality Commission who provide independent advice and monitoring. We also appreciate the annual reporting by the Scottish Government. While scrutiny from the PIC is in place the lack of progress towards achieving the targets shows it may lack any impact of effect.

**5. If you were involved in scrutiny of the Bill in 2016/17, has it had the impact you expected?**

N/A

**6. What does the implementation of the Act tell us about the effectiveness or otherwise of statutory targets as a way of driving policy?**

While the Act has driven policy at both a national level and at a local level through the LCPAR process, based on the local and national figures it hasn't had the impact that was expected. Competing priorities and ongoing budget constraints impact on the ability to invest more in preventing and tackling child poverty through the policy drivers meaning that the efforts needed to truly affect change continue to be found lacking.

While Covid was an unforeseeable factor which may have also impacted on child poverty longer term, it is interesting to see the reduction in child poverty rates across

Scotland during 2021-2022. While we recognise this year has been marked as not being fit for comparison due to data restrictions it would be interesting to explore if any information can be gleaned on whether any positive effect on rates did take place that year through additional supports such as increases to the Scottish Child Payment and furlough. It is very disheartening to see the sharp increase in child poverty rates the following year rising above the previous comparable year.

While the Scottish Government continues to state their commitment to eradicating child poverty and that this is the main priority for the Government this doesn't always translate into action. For example, local employability partnerships were left facing uncertainty regarding No One Left Behind payments this year with only a portion being provided at the start of the year which could have had an impact on local plans relating to parental employability.

## **7. Do you have any other comments?**

The question should be posed, can we truly legislate for this complex issue? The Act has been in place for seven years, how are Ministers being held / will be held accountable for the targets should they not be met?

At a local level Chief Officers, Leaders and Elected Members are accountable but efforts to tackle poverty and the impacts of poverty require efforts across community planning and also through workplaces and communities and the wider social, economic and environmental policy decisions.

We would also welcome work either nationally or locally to find out if people in our communities are actually feeling more or less impacted by poverty since the implementation of the Act and how this actually feels and is experienced in daily life.

The argument for investing more in this area to reduce costs across the whole system across the life course is clear. Experiences and relationships in early days, months, weeks and years form and shape health and health outcomes across the life course and in providing people with the skills and function to navigate life and the challenges that we face. Ultimately if we do not address child poverty, the impacts of this will continue to be seen across a range of public services, community and society.

Evidence shows that children living in low income families and experiencing lower socio economic status are much more likely to contend with a range of multiple stressors, risk factors and negative health outcomes. This is compounded by the adverse effects of early adversity and toxic stress that can stem from insecurity of income, housing and food in the home, where parents are left dealing with challenges which impacts their own wellbeing and relationships and leaves less energy and time to meet and attend to the needs of infants, children and young people during key developmental phases. Investment of resources, time and effort now in tackling child poverty can reduce the risk of mental illness, suicide, addictions and physical health conditions in our children and young people and reduce the burden on resources and services as our children and young people grow into adulthood and later life.