

Cross-Party Group on Poverty

Monday 10th November 2025, 12:00 – 13:00

Minute

Present

MSPs

- Beatrice Wishart MSP

Invited guests

- Professor Beth Watts-Cobbe, I-SPHERE
- Professor Rebecca Kay, Migration Policy Scotland

Non-MSP Group Members

- Aidan Barry
- Amanda Foster
- Anisha Yaseen, Thrive East Lothian CIC
- Anne McCormack, Poverty Alliance
- Augustijn van Gaalen, SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum
- Chloe Campbell, Poverty Alliance
- David Dick, EIS
- David Reilly, Poverty Alliance
- Erica Young, Citizens Advice Scotland
- Fiona McAvoy, Newton Primary
- Hayley Strang, the Roberston Trust
- Liisa Lehtinen, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Isla McIntosh, Poverty Alliance
- Janet Haugh, Right There
- John McFarlane, Advice Direct Scotland
- Keith Robson, Open University
- Louise Brady, Independent Age
- Mike Corbett, NASUWT
- Rahab Shimuli
- Ralph Hartley, Poverty Alliance
- Rebecca Fagan, Advice Direct Scotland
- Rebecca Richard, Inclusion Scotland
- Rhiannon Sims, I-SPHERE
- Ruth Boyle, Poverty Alliance
- Sarah Rogers, Families Outside
- Susan Mckellar, Scottish Women's Convention
- Traci Kirkland, Govan Community Project

Apologies

- Florence Burke, BBC Scotland
- Stephen Sinclair, Glasgow Caledonian University

Welcome and introduction

Beatrice Wishart (BW) welcomed attendees and introduced the focus of the meeting, migration and poverty.

BW highlighted that Scotland's migrant population is growing and diversifying rapidly. Between 2004 and 2015 Scotland's non-UK born population grew from 3.8% to 10.2%. At the same time, migrants and migrant families in Scotland are vulnerable to poverty and experience specific barriers and challenges in relation to each of the main pathways to poverty reduction recognised by Scottish Government and Scotland's wider anti-poverty movement: reducing costs; increasing incomes through employment; and increasing awareness and uptake of social security entitlements.

BW stated that their needs are too often overlooked or treated as niche and are not well-met by the existing landscape of support and service provision.

Presentation on the solutions to address poverty among migrant households

BW handed over to Dr Rebecca Kay (RK), Associate Director of Migration Policy Scotland (MPS), to provide an overview on their work relation in relation to poverty in migrant households.

RK outlined MPS's extensive programme of research and engagement over the past 2 years which has focused on poverty in migrant households. The aim has been to shift the conversation away from a narrow focus on asylum-seeking populations and towards the wider spectrum of migrants living in Scotland. MPS has consistently found that people across almost all immigration routes - including work, study, and family visas, those with EU settled or pre-settled status, and people with leave to remain - are experiencing hardship. This arises from high essential costs, immigration-related expenses, underemployment, barriers to support, and limited access to social security.

RK highlighted that Scotland's migrant population is both increasing and diversifying. Migrants contribute substantially to the country's demographic sustainability, workforce, and economy. At the same time, Scotland has ambitious poverty-reduction targets, particularly related to child poverty. National and UK-wide evidence makes clear that these goals cannot be met if migrant households remain an overlooked group.

Migrant families report significant difficulty meeting the rising cost of essential household expenditures. In MPS's research with 50 migrant parents living in poverty, three-quarters struggled to pay utility bills and over half struggled to afford food. Many parents reported skipping meals, rationing energy use, or prioritising children's needs over their own.

In addition to general cost-of-living pressures, migrants face substantial costs linked directly to immigration rules. Visa fees and the immigration health surcharge accumulate across multiple family members and renewal cycles; for a family of four, the combined cost in the first four years can exceed £21,000. Families also incur emotional and financial strain from the costs of maintaining ties with relatives abroad, such as travel for family emergencies or major life events.

Increasing household earnings is widely seen as a key route out of poverty. Migrants themselves also consistently identify improved employment as the most viable way to reduce financial insecurity. However, MPS research highlights several obstacles that disproportionately affect migrant workers:

- **Underemployment** is widespread. many migrants struggle to secure roles matching their skills or qualifications, partly due to limited recognition of overseas qualifications and undervaluing of experience gained abroad.
- **Visa restrictions** confine many migrants to precarious or low-paid work;
- **Language barriers** impede access to jobs and career progression; and
- **Low awareness and uptake of funded early learning and childcare** due to confusion over eligibility and limited informal childcare networks.

These factors combine to create pronounced barriers to labour-market progression, income stability, and longer-term economic mobility.

RK highlighted that a central issue is the impact of the “no recourse to public funds” (NRPF) condition. Many migrants subject to NRPF cannot access mainstream social security. This restricts routes out of poverty and removes vital safety nets. In their research, MPS found widespread confusion among both migrants and frontline staff about entitlements. Fear of breaching immigration conditions, coupled with a lack of clear guidance, leads to under-claiming even among those eligible. Half of the migrant parents in MPS’s study had never accessed employability advice, while 40% had no or only negative experiences of advice services aimed at reducing household costs or increasing income.

RK identified a structural problem in Scotland’s current support landscape: a division between migrant-specialist organisations and mainstream services (such as employability, income maximisation, and financial-health-check services). Specialist migrant organisations often have deep expertise but operate with limited and insecure funding, while mainstream services may lack confidence, knowledge, or experience in supporting migrants. Coordination between these two spheres is limited and inconsistent, leaving families to navigate confusing referrals and repeated signposting between organisations that cannot meet their needs.

Drawing on MPS’s research and the work of its policy laboratory, RK presented four key recommendations for national government and parliamentarians. All are framed as actions that can be taken within current devolved powers:

1. Strengthen the quality and accessibility of advice and support for migrants

- Ensure funding models and service-design processes consider migrants’ needs;
- Build capacity across frontline services to understand rights and entitlements, including the complexities of NRPF; and
- Invest in workforce skills relating to culturally competent and inclusive support.

2. Reduce barriers to employability and career progression

- Improve recognition processes for overseas qualifications;
- Work with employers and professional bodies to value overseas experience and skills; and
- Ensure employability schemes are accessible to migrants, including those unsure of their rights due to NRPF constraints.

3. Expand access to social security for families affected by NRPF

- The Scottish Child Payment is a successful anti-poverty measure, yet children in NRPF-affected households remain excluded; and
- MPS urges Scottish Parliament to advocate strongly for extending support to these children, noting that national child-poverty targets cannot be met while this group remains unsupported.

4. Improve data collection and analysis on migrant poverty

- Current monitoring frameworks do not adequately capture migrant household poverty; and
- Better data is essential for targeted policymaking and for integrating migrant experiences into national poverty-reduction strategies.

RK added that local authorities also have scope to strengthen links between mainstream and specialist organisations, clarify eligibility, and deliver more coordinated, person-centred support.

Presentation on the evaluation of the [Fair Ways Scotland](#) partnership

BW introduced Professor Beth Watts-Cobbe (BWC), Deputy Director of the Institute of Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research, who presented findings from an evaluation of the Fair Way Scotland programme.

BWC began by stressing the broader UK policy context in which the programme operates. For more than a decade, UK Governments have pursued a “hostile environment” approach intended to deter what they describe as illegal migration. A central element of this has been restricting access to welfare benefits, statutory support, and, in many cases, the right to work. As a result, many migrants face severe gaps in support when they encounter crisis situations such as homelessness or financial hardship. Local authorities provide only a very thin, parallel safety net for adults with NRPF, usually focused on families with children, and even this provision varies widely.

Scotland’s approach differs markedly. The Scottish Government maintains that no one should face destitution or homelessness irrespective of immigration status and is the only UK nation with a dedicated Ending Destitution Together strategy. Within this policy framework, Fair Way Scotland has become a key national response, combining system-change work with direct assistance: casework, specialist immigration legal advice, modest cash support, and community-based accommodation. In the last year, around 1,000 people received casework, 266 received both casework and cash support, and 45 accessed community accommodation.

Fair Way supports a diverse group of people who originally came to Scotland for many reasons but still face unresolved immigration status issues—often after years or decades in the UK. Participants fall largely into three groups: people whose asylum appeals are exhausted, EU nationals excluded from mainstream support post-Brexit, and others with NRPF because of visa restrictions or being undocumented. The evaluation estimates around 4,000 people in Scotland need this kind of support annually.

The mixed-methods evaluation included qualitative work and, importantly, a survey of service users across Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. One of the clearest findings is that the local “parallel” safety net for people with NRPF varies significantly across Scotland. Edinburgh interprets care-needs legislation more generously, while Glasgow and Aberdeen set higher thresholds, leaving more people without help. Homelessness services also differ: Glasgow and Edinburgh provide little to no statutory response, whereas Aberdeen accepts applications and provides temporary accommodation during eligibility checks. Post-pandemic emergency accommodation has also contracted sharply, increasing pressure on Fair Way.

Survey findings illustrate extremely high levels of destitution among Fair Way participants. 93% meet the definition of destitution, and three-quarters reported weekly incomes below £60. This is far higher than the rate among people experiencing destitution in the UK overall. More than one-third reported having no income at all in the previous month. Material deprivation was striking across essential items. Compared with the broader UK destitution population, those supported by Fair Way showed significantly higher rates of unmet need for food, clothing, toiletries, and basic shelter.

Housing insecurity was acute: 19% were rough sleeping at the time of the survey, 61% had slept rough in the preceding year, and 17% had left accommodation within the last year because they felt unsafe. Far fewer people in the Fair Way cohort had a home of their own, with much larger proportions relying on rough sleeping, sofa surfing, or poor-quality, costly forms of temporary accommodation such as B&Bs and hotels.

This insecurity was reflected in health outcomes. Mental wellbeing scores were far below the population average, and service users’ reliance on healthcare was much higher - hospital appointments six times higher than average and A&E use two and a half times higher - indicating significant unmet need and associated public costs.

Despite these challenges, the evaluation found clear evidence that Fair Way Scotland makes a meaningful difference. People receiving both cash and casework were less likely to be destitute, especially regarding food. Longer engagement with the programme was linked to reduced deprivation and reduced exposure to rough sleeping or unsafe accommodation. Partner organisations also reported positive migration-status outcomes, a critical factor in resolving homelessness risk in the long term.

Economic modelling suggested that Fair Way’s approach is cost-effective. For every £1 spent, around £1.65 is saved in public service costs, with even greater returns when mental wellbeing improvements are factored in. Expanding community-based accommodation would likely generate net savings, given the high cost and poor quality of the temporary accommodation many people currently rely on.

BWC closed by giving several recommendations from the evaluation:

- The Scottish Government and COSLA should pilot a strengthened local model in an area not currently covered by Fair Way, using learning from three years of practice to maximise the use of local authority powers and reduce barriers to support;
- There should be a fair, consistent approach nationwide ensuring temporary accommodation during eligibility assessments, accepting homelessness applications

from eligible households, and interpreting social-care duties in ways that do not set prohibitively high thresholds;

- NRPF-related destitution and homelessness considerations should be embedded across all relevant policy portfolios, increasing accountability and lived-experience involvement in decision-making, and expanding investment in the Ending Destitution Together strategy
- There is a critical shortage of timely, high-quality immigration legal advice; addressing this is vital for resolving people's status and enabling sustainable routes out of homelessness and destitution.

Questions and discussion

- Ralph Hartley noted the disconnect between specialist migrant organisations and mainstream service delivery, and asked RK whether a similar gap exists in how we advocate for change between organisations with migrant expertise and those focused on poverty and how bridges might be built. RK said that within the migration sector there is very limited capacity and resource for policy work, which was one reason MPS was established. Many migrant organisations are small and volunteer-run, so their focus is on supporting service users rather than influencing policy. Initiatives like the Edinburgh Advice Network, which brings migrant organisations into mainstream support, are therefore welcome. MPS also has a new programme to build capacity in migrant centres around influencing and policy work. BWC added that a strength of Fair Way Scotland is its foundation as a partnership between the migrant and homelessness sectors, but that the complexity of poverty and homelessness continues to prompt discussion about information-sharing across devolved nations.
- BW acknowledged that much of the discussion had focused on cities and asked whether any work had been done in island and Highland communities. RK said MPS had made efforts to reach beyond the central belt, including Argyll and Bute and Dumfries and Galloway. Some areas have highly engaged organisations doing strong work, but lower population density makes it harder to stay up to date with local migrant needs, entitlements and languages. In some rural areas, service providers are wary of giving incorrect advice, so MPS is working to build confidence and capacity. RK emphasised how rapidly migrant populations and circumstances are changing, which creates challenges for small rural organisations. BWC agreed, noting that current demand is concentrated in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, but there is a clear case for expanding services and expertise beyond these cities, particularly given experiences of forced labour and trafficking linked to rural labour markets.
- Erica Young asked what legal choices the Scottish Government can make within devolved competence to improve the situation. BWC said a key message from Fair Way Scotland is that much more can be done, and that there needs to be confidence in using the full extent of devolved powers. Systemic change is required, including auditing key policy areas to identify where systems can be redesigned to avoid exclusion, alongside changes in practice. RK added that migrants are part of the Scottish population and should have access to the same resources.
- Isla McIntosh highlighted the Citizens Panel supported by the Poverty Alliance, which has been contributing to the next Child Poverty Delivery Plan. The group expressed

strong support for extending services and support to migrant families and children, emphasising that migrant children are Scotland's future and must be supported.

AOB and Close

There was no other business raised by members. BW closed the meeting, stating that the next meeting would be in January (with further details to be circulated by email) and that this would include the CPG's AGM.