



# HIGHLANDS GET HEARD SCOTLAND SUMMARY REPORT 2019/2020





## ABOUT THE POVERTY ALLIANCE

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The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together, we influence policy and practice, provide evidence through research, support communities to challenge poverty and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty.

Our members include grassroots community groups, activists who are experiencing poverty, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

## ABOUT GET HEARD SCOTLAND

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*Get Heard Scotland* (GHS) is a programme coordinated by the Poverty Alliance and funded by the Scottish Government as part of *Every Child Every Chance*, the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan. GHS is designed to help people on low incomes get their voices heard on the policies and decisions that most impact their lives and their communities.

Very simply, it aims to find out – by holding discussions with people affected by poverty across Scotland – what is working in their community, what is not working, and what needs to change to better support people living on low incomes and loosen the grip of poverty on their lives.

# INTRODUCTION

Over 1 million people – including over 240,000 children – are currently living in the grip of poverty in Scotland. This number has increased in recent years and is projected to increase further in the years to come, with some analysis estimating that by 2029/30 around 37% of children in Scotland could be living in poverty.<sup>1</sup>

The Highlands is an area that has lower levels of child poverty than the national average, with child poverty rates of 20% compared with the Scottish average of 24%.

Significant variations in levels of child poverty do exist across the region though, with 28% of children in Cromarty Firth living in poverty compared with 11% in the Black Isle.<sup>2</sup>

It is because of the significant variations in levels of child poverty as well as the fact that many families living in poverty in the Highlands are living in rural areas – which can significantly exacerbate the experience of poverty – that the Highland Council area was one of the key geographical target areas for GHS in 2019/20.

# BACKGROUND

11 GHS discussions took place in the Highlands between August 2019 and November 2019, with around 95 people in total taking part in these discussions. The discussions took place in Inverness, Wick, Invergordon, Skye, Wick, Golspie and Dingwall, and the majority of the discussions were facilitated by members of the Poverty Alliance staff, and took place in partnership with organisations, services and projects such as:

- Caithness Voluntary Group
- Liberty Project
- Sutherland Voluntary Group
- Connecting Carers
- HUG (Action for Mental Health)
- Highland Third Sector Interface

All of the discussions – while occasionally different in terms of particular focus or scope – were structured around three key questions:

- What is currently working well for people on low incomes?
- What is currently not working well for people on low incomes?
- What needs to change?

This paper provides an overview of the main issues raised in these discussions, as well as solutions as proposed by the people who participated in the discussions, with key points of interest for both local authorities, national government, third sector, and a range of public bodies.

<sup>1</sup> Reed H. and G. Stark, *Forecasting child poverty in Scotland*, Scottish Government, 2018. <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0053/00533637.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> End Child Poverty, *Poverty in Your Area 2019*, <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/poverty-in-your-area-2019/>

# WHAT'S WORKING?

## Scottish social security

Aspects of the Scottish social security system were positively cited in two discussions, with the Best Start Grant and the Carer's Allowance Supplement said to have made a positive difference to people's lives.

There was also a sense in one discussion with people who have experience of mental health issues, that they *were* being listened to by the Scottish social security system, for example through the social security experience panels that have helped to develop components of the Scottish system like the Social Security Charter.

Income maximisation services delivered by Highland Council were also spoken about in positive terms by a number of participants, for the way in which they can support people to access their entitlements.

## Food initiatives

A number of local food-based initiatives were referenced by participants as examples of good practice, for example MOO Food (a community food company based in Muir of Ord), FareShare and other community zero waste initiatives.

It was stated in two separate discussions that food initiatives that incorporate choice and self-preparation were significantly preferable to foodbank models, because of their more open approach which was said to be much less stigmatising.

In one discussion though, in Skye, the local foodbank was spoken about positively. It was said that the foodbank worked well and that it was well-supported by local organisations, for example the local Citizens Advice Bureau. It was also agreed that the model used – to deliver food to people's homes rather than

asking individuals to pick up food from a foodbank – was less stigmatising than other models used by some foodbanks.

Churches and other community groups are also said to be responding to food insecurity across different communities in the Highlands, but this was not considered to be sustainable by some participants, given the rising level of demand as a result of the increasing numbers of people being pulled into income crisis.

## Community initiatives and support

A number of local community-led initiatives were spoken about as being important supports for people living in different communities across the Highlands. Initiatives that help to address social isolation – which can disproportionately impact people living in poverty and particularly people living in more remote and rural areas – were said to be especially helpful.

Other community-led responses to poverty were cited, such as toy libraries in Golspie and Brora, young mum's groups, community transport initiatives used by children to access clubs and activities, as well as support from local churches.

The private sector was also said to be supportive in some areas, with examples of Timpsons who will dry clean clothes for free for job interviews, as well as Stagecoach who were said to offer free travel to job interviews in some areas.

More broadly, it was mentioned in a number of discussions that a strong community spirit exists in many areas – particularly small villages – which can act as an important support for people who are struggling to get by.

## Cost of the school day

A range of existing measures aimed at reducing the cost of the school day were identified by parents as being particularly helpful. For example, School Clothing Grants – particularly now that their value has been increased to a minimum of £100 per child in each local authority in Scotland – were said to be extremely helpful for families who would otherwise struggle to pay for new school uniforms for their children.

Free school meals for children in primary 1-3 were welcomed – particularly as they are universal – and for children in primary 4 who were eligible for free school meals they were also said to be help to ease the pressure on families.

Where they exist, school breakfast clubs were spoken about in positive terms – both at primary and secondary schools – as a means of ensuring that children are fed and to reduce costs for families. After-school initiatives were also said by parents to be welcome, but with the caveat that accessing these can be challenging for families on low incomes.

The Pupil Equity Fund was raised in two discussions as a welcome support for schools, but with the caveat that it is unclear how many schools are spending the money they are allocated, and that it is unclear whether all of the spending is directly impacting children from low income families.

One example of good practice that was cited was ‘Step Forward Wick Youth’. The project, which is based at Wick High School, involves pupils identified as living in areas of high deprivation in Wick working together with school staff and youth workers to identify issues impacting on them and look at solutions.

## School holiday support

Additional support that is available to low income families during the school holidays was raised in a number of discussions. School holiday lunch provision – funded by Highland Council – was referenced by some, as well as ‘holiday hunger’ clubs run by some schools.

Also mentioned was the delivery of holiday activities for young people which include the provision of food, which was thought to be a welcome and non-stigmatising response to food insecurity during the school holidays.

## Local authority support

One discussion group raised the issue of free wi-fi that is provided by Highland Council, which was said to be extremely beneficial given the increasing reliance (including in the social security system) on the internet. The caveat to this was that the wi-fi was said to work well in the eastern Highlands but not in the western Highlands.

## Childcare

The issue of childcare was raised across a number of discussions, and the additional free childcare hours that are being funded by the Scottish Government was raised in some discussions as being extremely welcome, and as something that should help to ease a significant financial burden on families.

# WHAT'S NOT WORKING?

## Transport

More than any other issue, transport was raised repeatedly across almost every discussion that took place. Indeed, one participant described it as “*the biggest single issue in the Highlands.*” Very simply, it was said that – in many areas across the Highlands – the transport system is both extremely costly and, for many communities, extremely unreliable and/or unavailable.

The impact of poor transport provision was said to be significant. As well as leading to social isolation (especially for young people and older people), it also means that individuals living in more remote or rural areas in the Highlands can find it extremely challenging to access the services that they need. For example, at one discussion in Skye it was said that – while the local Citizens Advice Bureau does undertake outreach – it can still be very difficult for individuals to access the service unless they have a car due to the almost entire absence of any public transport.

Other impacts include children being prevented from accessing the same leisure or extra-curricular activities as their peers, and workers (particularly young workers) finding it hugely challenging to access employment without a car. Indeed, it was said in one area that if people do not have a car then “*it can be impossible to travel*”, with forced car ownership being common across many areas.

One participant raised the issue of school travel, with (in their area at least) children who live within a three mile radius of the school not being eligible for a free bus pass. For children living in low income families who may not be able to afford to run a car, this

can therefore mean a long walk to and from school; something that can be made worse during the dark of winter when additional safety issues can arise.

The poor availability of transport in some communities was said to have been exacerbated by the phasing out of some council community transport schemes and by the removal of council funding for supported bus networks. This was reported to have particularly negatively impacted younger and older people.

## Stigma

The stigma of living on a low income – and particularly stigma related to the social security system – was raised in a number of discussions as a significant source of anxiety. In one discussion stigma was described as “endemic”, especially for lone parents. For people with mental health issues, there was also said to be additional and intersecting stigma that made life more challenging.

In smaller communities in the Highlands, it was considered that stigma could be significantly worse and more profound. In one of the discussions, it was said that the local foodbank delivers food parcels to people’s homes and operates through intermediaries in order to help with ensuring individuals’ anonymity. While this was helpful in the sense of protecting people, it was also considered to be indicative of the levels of stigma that exist. As a result of this stigma, it was believed that poverty is often ‘invisible’ in many areas of the Highlands, and that many people experiencing poverty are doing so in silence and without the support, information, advice and signposting that they may need.

## Social security

Issues related to social security were raised in a large proportion of the discussions that took place. The numerous issues related to Universal Credit – for example the five week wait and the advance payment process – were raised by a number of participants. It was said to be having a significant impact on families, often leading to issues with debt that could pull families even deeper into poverty.

One discussion – that primarily involved individuals with experience of mental health issues – focused on how people with mental health issues can find it additionally challenging to access social security support such as the Personal Independence Payment (PIP). This was said to be because the current descriptors for PIP lack the provisions that cater for people with mental ill-health because they focus on daily living and physical mobility without consideration for the psychological impacts of mental ill-health on an individual.

The issue of individuals not being able to access what they are entitled to was raised in a number of discussions, with the feeling that people often miss out not only because they are unaware of their entitlements and how to access them, but also because of strict eligibility cut-offs. It was said that – because social security eligibility is largely income-based – this means that many individuals living in the Highlands (particularly in more remote or rural areas) are not eligible, despite living in poverty due to their significantly higher living costs. It was felt that because living costs are not generally considered by the social security system, this had a disproportionately negative impact on many people living in the Highlands, particularly people living in more remote and rural areas.

## Housing

The “chronic” lack of availability of affordable housing – whether in the social or private rented sector – was raised by a number of discussion participants. At one discussion in Skye, it was said that there was a current waiting list of 400 people for social housing and that there were significant challenges around temporary accommodation. While some temporary accommodation was said to be available, it was not suitable for many people, particularly women. As a result, it was said that – instead of entering the homelessness system – many people instead chose to ‘sofa-surf’.

On homelessness, one discussion also referenced the “noticeable increase” in the number of families presenting as homeless, with families also spending longer than before in temporary accommodation.

The lack of appropriate and affordable housing in some areas was said by participants to be driven – at least in part – by the tourism industry and the desire of landlords to maximise their profits by marketing their properties as holiday houses rather than homes for local residents. This was also said to be driving the insecurity of tenure that many tenants experience in the private rental sector.

## Support for community organisations and bodies

It was clear from most discussions that took place that community organisations play a vital role in supporting people living on low incomes across the Highlands. However, it was also clear that many community organisations face significant challenges that prevent them from being as impactful as they would like to be. An issue that was raised in several discussions was the

fragmented nature of funding available to community organisations, with organisations often spending significant periods of time chasing funding rather than focusing on their core work of supporting people living in poverty. It was also felt that there was not enough continuity of funding, with funding often being too short-term for projects to be genuinely impactful.

A significant focus of one discussion in Invergordon was the disconnect between the rhetoric around community empowerment and the actual level of resources available to communities. It was strongly felt that despite good intentions from national government, communities were still unable to access the resources required to be genuinely empowered; with the money that is available often being short-term in nature.

Allied to this, it was felt that there is still a lack of meaningful consultation – particularly on the part of local Community Planning Partnerships – with communities. There can be a lack of meaningful third sector and community representation in Community Planning Partnerships, which can skew actions away from addressing social and economic inequalities.

Finally, it was felt that investment in local communities in the Highlands can often be targeted at the tourism industry, rather than focused on the needs of local communities. While it was accepted that the tourism industry does bring jobs to the region (albeit these jobs can often be low-paid and insecure), it was felt that the current balance of investment was wrong and that spending money on car parks (in order to better accommodate increased numbers of tourists travelling by car), for example, was often doing nothing to benefit people living on low incomes.

## **Distinctive nature of rural poverty**

In a number of discussions, a clear theme to emerge was the distinctive nature of rural poverty. Whether in relation to transport, employment opportunities or living costs, it was felt that rurality could both make experiencing poverty more likely and exacerbate the poverty that individuals may experience.

For example, a major issue that was raised during one discussion was the absence of support for young carers looking after parents with mental ill health. While this absence of support may be an issue that many young carers experience, it was said to be more profound for young carers in rural areas, given that access to services can be even more challenging.

While the distinctive nature of rural poverty was said to be significant, there was a sense from many that this is not often reflected in policy development or delivery. For example, while living costs in rural areas can be significantly higher this is not reflected in the level of support provided by the social security system.

## **Childcare**

The availability – or lack thereof – of childcare was an issue that was raised by a number of discussion participants. As well as a lack of availability of childcare, the cost of childcare was also said to be significant and indeed prohibitive for many families living on low incomes. One end result was that many families are spending huge amounts of money of childcare, with one participant reporting that half of her wages are spent on childcare. Such an outlay can mean that families are unable to pay for other essential costs – such as transport and households bills.



Poor or unaffordable childcare provision was also said to have a significantly detrimental impact on the ability of mothers to access – or return to – employment. A lack of wraparound childcare facilities (e.g. after school care) can often mean that that even if women are able to access or return to employment, this employment has to be part-time or reduced hours.

For parents – particularly women – living in rural areas, juggling childcare and employment was said to be even more challenging, given the need to often travel significantly longer distances to access employment opportunities.

One exacerbating factor that was raised was the trend for secondary schools to close for half days on Fridays; meaning an additional childcare cost for families.

## Digital connectivity

With access to more and more services – such as Universal Credit – being reliant upon digital access, some participants highlighted the lack of digital connectivity within some communities in the Highlands, with some more rural areas not being properly serviced by communication networks and particularly by broadband providers.

This can have an impact on a range of aspects of people's lives, ranging from accessing information on services to managing social security claims.

## Employment

For people living in rural communities, employment opportunities were said to often be extremely limited. Where employment was available it was said to often be – due to the centrality of the tourism and hospitality industries in many places in the Highlands – low paid and insecure. Younger workers were said to be particularly impacted by the prevalence of low-paid and insecure work.

There was also a sense at some discussions, for example in Invergordon, that the local tourism industry was not being effectively utilised to help people living on low incomes, with profits from the industry often not being re-invested in the local community.

## Fuel poverty

Fuel poverty was one of the most commonly-raised issues in all discussions across the Highlands, with many discussion participants reporting serious challenging in covering the cost of their energy bills.

Given the limited availability of mains gas in many areas in the Highlands – as well as the more inclement weather in many more rural and remote areas of the region – households in the Highlands pay disproportionately more on energy bills than households elsewhere in Scotland. For example, one participant reported paying around £50 each week for gas during the winter, while another spoke of paying at least £105 per month for coal during the winter. Another said that *“you're forced to choose between heating your house or feeding your kids. It's a constant nightmare.”*

It was felt that despite these higher costs, households in the Highlands did not receive the appropriate level of additional support, particularly through the social security system which did not reflect the additional costs borne by people living in different geographical areas.

## Centralisation of services

The centralisation of services within the Highlands was a theme through a number of the discussions that were held. At discussions in Invergordon and Skye, for example, the centralisation of NHS services was raised as a significant challenge. For example, at one discussion consisting of young mums, they spoke of how all

paediatricians and consultants that they may require for their children are all based over 100 miles away, with no option of bringing services closer to where they live.

This centralisation of services – predominantly in Inverness – was believed to be a particular problem for people living on low incomes, especially people experiencing in-work poverty. This was because they often have to take a day of unpaid leave to travel to appointments in Inverness and also lose £10 from their travel payment because they are in work. While the centralised location of maternity and paediatric services were particular issues raised, this centralisation was also said to have taken place with a range of different services and clinics.

For example, a number of groups raised the issue of access to mental health services and of how people living in more remote and rural areas can often be left without adequate access to the kind of specialist provision and support that they may need. For example, at a discussion in Skye it was stated that there was no specialist mental health provision on the island and that a local cognitive behavioural therapy nursing post had been lost, with a particular impact being felt on young people experiencing mental health issues.

## Cost of school day

For many parents participating in discussions, the cost of the school day was said to pose significant challenges.

The cost of extra-curricular activities was said to be entirely unaffordable for most families living on low incomes. Of particular concern was schools that organise expensive school trips, which many families on low incomes struggle to afford. It was

reported that schools rarely offer financial support or discounts to families who may struggle with the cost of trips, and that this left parents in an impossible choice between spending money they don't have or on their child potentially missing out on valuable opportunities to learn.

While it was felt that the delivery of free school meals has improved in recent years, it was still agreed that their targeted nature (beyond primary 3) mean that children are singled out and that this can be stigmatising for children and young people in school.

In relation to School Clothing Grants, it was strongly felt by parents that – for secondary school pupils – the amount provided was not sufficient to cover all school clothing requirements, meaning that parents often have to buy more school wear for their children during the school year.

## Holiday food provision

While schemes are in place to address food insecurity during the school holidays, there appeared to be low awareness of these schemes at the discussions that took place, with some participants having never heard of the schemes and not knowing who the providers were. One group stated that there had been a lack of contact from local authorities to school regarding the holiday schemes, which meant that schools were not signposting families towards the schemes or promoting them in the way that could be expected.

One group agreed that there was not enough evidence of these schemes working well in rural areas, with it being felt that funding for the schemes were not reaching those families and children most in need.

# WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

## Social security

The impact of UK-level social security reform was clear from a large number of the discussions. Key suggestions from participants for change – at both the Scottish and UK levels – included:

- Ending the five week wait for Universal Credit;
- Paying childcare costs upfront through Universal Credit, rather than in arrears;
- Providing additional support for carers. While the Carer's Allowance Supplement is helpful it does not go far enough;
- Reviewing the eligibility criteria for the Carer's Allowance Supplement to include young carers and kinship carers;
- Better access to benefits advice, including localised benefits advice agencies especially in more remote and rural areas.

## Transport

Transport clearly played a critical role in the lives of people participating in our discussions, with there being major issues related to the affordability and availability of transport across the Highlands. Key suggestions for change included:

- Significant expansion of concessionary travel schemes to include people living on low incomes, for example anyone with a Universal Credit entitlement;
- Additional local authority support for community transport initiatives, which provide a lifeline to many remote and rural communities;

- Additional local authority support for community transport initiatives for schools, particularly in areas that are not served by public transport;
- Additional Scottish Government investment in transport infrastructure and services in the Highlands;
- Local employers to consider providing transport schemes for their workers;
- Additional support from the JobCentre to enable people – particularly people living in remote or rural areas – to attend all of their appointments. For example organising group transport schemes for people living in the same community;
- The provision of taxi vouchers to families on low incomes living in areas with no viable public transport options, to enable their children to participate in extracurricular or afterschool activities.

## Rural issues

A clear theme to emerge from discussions was the particular nature of living on a low income in a rural area. Key suggestions for change included:

- Greater acknowledgement that people in rural areas spend more on fuel, food and transport, and for this to be reflected in the financial support provided to people, for example via the social security system;
- Better measurement of rural poverty at a Scottish Government level.

## Community issues

Particularly in smaller or more remote and rural communities, community initiatives, projects and spaces are a vital support to people living on low incomes. Key suggestions for change included:

- Better use of community facilities such as community halls and schools during the school holidays, for example activities aimed at children from families living on low incomes. Head teachers and authorities are often reluctant to open these during school holidays because of the health and safety implications and concerns;
- Local authorities to more effectively support the work of community groups and trusts, by providing them with longer-term financial support. This would allow organisations to plan and deliver their work effectively.

## Cost of school day

The cost of the school day was a financial burden on many of the parents who took part in discussions. Key suggestions for change included:

- Ending the cut-off point for when parents can apply for School Clothing Grants, given that – particularly secondary school children – often require additional school wear during the year;
- Expanding the provision of free school meals to include all pupils across primary and secondary schools;
- Introducing school meal payment systems in all schools that enable parents to pay directly to the school office or council, so that there can be no risk of stigma in relation to the provision of free school meals;
- Making breakfast available to all children in all schools;

- Taking action to ensure that afterschool activities and school trips are accessible and affordable for all children, for example schools to maintain a fund to cover the activity costs for children from low income families.

## Other suggestions for change

A number of other proposals for change were suggested that covered a broad range of topics and issues. These included:

- Additional support to alleviate fuel poverty. LPG grants are available, however rural communities rely upon electricity and oil for heating in winter and so these grants are not helping them;
- More investment in access to broadband in remote and rural communities;
- Investment in decent work/incentives and support for employers to create decent work opportunities to encourage young people to remain in their communities rather than move for work to larger cities;
- Highland Council to undergo a process of decentralisation, and to devolve power and services to communities across the Highlands;
- Develop a different and more dignified model for foodbanks across the Highlands, for example community food pantries;
- Investment in affordable housing, as well as the introduction of local occupancy clauses to new housing developments (particularly in areas with high levels of buy-to-let properties such as Skye).

# CONCLUSION

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The clear theme to emerge from all of the GHS discussions that took place across the Highland Council area in 2019/20 was that – given the accumulated impact of social security cuts, a labour market that is not currently meeting workers’ needs, and rising living costs – people are finding it ever-more difficult to get by. What is true across Scotland and the rest of the UK is true also in the Highlands; the grip of poverty is tightening on the lives of too many people.

For many people in the Highlands, this grip of poverty is tightened yet further by the manner in which rurality impacts their lives. For people living in more remote and rural areas of the Highlands, it can not only be more difficult to access the services that they may need but their cost of living – whether it is transport, housing or fuel – can be significantly higher.

Yet it was also clear that despite this, there are some positive supports that are much valued by people living on low incomes. Whether informal community responses to poverty or services delivered by Highland Council – like income maximisation services – these initiatives and services are providing a lifeline to people who are struggling to stay afloat.

But the range of solutions proposed by participants also make clear that there is much more that can be done – both at a local and national level – to tackle poverty across the Highlands. Whether investing in more welfare rights services in remote and rural areas, providing additional support for community transport initiatives, or utilising community facilities more creatively in order to provide free activities for young people, there is much action that can be taken to boost incomes, reduce costs, and ease the pressure on families across the Highlands.



**The Poverty Alliance**

**94 Hope Street**

**Glasgow**

**G2 6PH**

**[www.povertyalliance.org](http://www.povertyalliance.org)**

**0141 353 0440**

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