



MIDLOTHIAN GET HEARD SCOTLAND SUMMARY REPORT 2019/2020





ABOUT THE POVERTY ALLIANCE

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

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.

Midlothian is a region that has higher levels of child poverty than the national average, with a child poverty rate of 25% compared

with the Scottish average of 24%. Significant variations in levels of child poverty do exist across the region though, with 19% of children in Penicuik living in poverty compared with 31% in Liberton/Gilmerton.

It is because of the higher-than-average levels of child poverty, the rurality of many communities in Midlothian, and the region's industrial past that it was one of the key geographical target areas for GHS in 2019/20.

BACKGROUND

7 GHS discussions took place in Midlothian between October 2019 and December 2019, with around 41 people in total taking part in these discussions. The discussions took place in Gorebridge, Woodburn, Penicuik, Bonnyrigg and Mayfield, and were facilitated by Poverty Alliance staff. They took place in partnership with services and organisations such as:

- Midlothian Sure Start
- Gorebridge Community Trust
- Midlothian Council's Home School Practitioner's Project

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.

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

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

WHAT'S WORKING?

Community facilities and activities

Participants across a number of discussions were clear that community-based facilities and activities played an important role in their lives. A number of community-based responses to poverty were spoken about in positive terms, with churches playing a vital role by, for example, providing lunch clubs and clothes exchanges.

Specific programme and initiatives focused on children were referenced throughout the discussions in extremely positive terms. Play Midlothian, for example, provides activities as well as low-cost food for children during the school holidays, while the local Sure Start centres provide activities and trips during the school holidays. Initiatives such as this were said to help to ensure that children from families living on low incomes are able to access social and leisure activities.

Sure Start centres more broadly were said to provide a 'lifeline' to families. As well as delivering activities during the school holidays and providing childcare all-year round, they also provide courses for parents on topics ranging from confidence-building to first aid training to therapy. This provision not only delivers practical support but also the kind of social connections that many families living on low incomes may lack.

Family learning centres were also spoken about in very positive terms. They were said to provide support for parents and children, and were particularly important in terms of supporting children through the transition from nursery to school. They also help to build parents' confidence and resilience, as well as enabling parents to make social connections. As well as this, the centres also provide work and training; vital for parents who may otherwise find it challenging to access appropriate employment or training opportunities. One participant, for example, was undertaking training at the centre to work in the creche.

Social security

While the majority of participants' experiences in relation to social security were not positive, there were some positive aspects mentioned. This included the new Best Start Grant – available to families on low incomes – which was said to be a welcome source of support at critical points of children's lives.

While not directly social security-related, the Scottish Government's baby box was also spoken about positively.

Employment

The majority of the participants worked, indicating that employment opportunities are available in the area. Participants also spoke positively about work, talking about how it gave them a sense of identity and independence.

Central to their positive experiences of employment were supportive and flexible employers who were willing and able to change their hours of work to reflect changes in their circumstances, such as having children. One participant had worked for the same employer for 18 years, and had been able to negotiate varying hours and shift patterns as her family circumstances had changed.

Food

While foodbanks were not considered to be sustainable or dignified responses to food insecurity in the long-term, some examples of food provision were spoken about positively as a way of ameliorating food insecurity in the short-term. For example, participants in Penicuik spoke of how a local foodbank there delivers food parcels weekly to families with two or more children; providing much-needed short-term support.

Childcare

Parents who took part in discussions strongly welcomed the Scottish Government's commitment to increasing free childcare entitlement to 1,140 hours per

year. They believed that this would free up time for them to increase their hours at work as well as to access training and education opportunities. One participant said they were planning to use the increased entitlement to help them taking a nursing qualification access course. It was also felt that the increase in nursery hours would have a positive benefit for the children in terms of their learning and social development.

Parents were also strongly supportive of community-based childcare organisations

such as Sure Start Midlothian, who already provide a high level of childcare as well as additional support for families.

Education

Participants were supportive of steps that local primary schools had taken to help better support families living on low incomes. For example, they referenced free breakfast clubs provided by schools which help to ease the pressure on families.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING?

Community facilities and activities

There was concern and frustration about some community facilities, with a lack of facilities and evening/weekend/school holiday clubs and facilities for some age groups, such as those aged 12 to 16 years. Participants at a discussion in Gorebridge felt that this had led to an increase in underage drinking and vandalism. The activities for children and young people that did exist were said to be too expensive for families living in poverty.

In Mayfield, discussion participants spoke of how, because there is no central community hub, it can be difficult for residents to know about services and initiatives and difficult to identify where to go for help and advice. Some participants in the discussion had never heard of the local development trusts, for example.

The impact of local authority cuts and changes to the way that local authority services are delivered was also a key theme. For example, some participants spoke of how some services had been centralised at Newbattle High School, resulting in the loss of services such as the local library and leisure centre. This made it more challenging for families – particularly those on low incomes – to access the support and services they needed.

Some participants also spoke of how, due to local authority cuts, regular street clean-ups in some areas had been stopped. The onus was now on the residents themselves to organise clean-ups. This has resulted in increased levels of litter and meant that some children's play areas have become unsafe.

Participants in Gorebridge felt that the closure of the police station had led to an increase in crime (theft, burglaries, vandalism). Participants also frustrated at the inconsistency in the help received from the police which has led to distrust between residents and the police. While not perhaps directly related to the issue of poverty, it fed into a sense of communities not being prioritised or properly listened to.

Digital access

The cost of wi-fi and broadband access was raised by some participants. All participants had access to home broadband, but the cost was said to represent a significant burden on families. With an increasing reliance on online services – for example the need for people to manage their Universal Credit claims online – it was said that people living in poverty were in serious danger of either missing out or of simply seeing their living costs increase yet further.

Housing issues

Housing, especially the time it takes for repairs, was highlighted in some discussions, with a large proportion of participants living in social housing. One participant told of having to wait so long for a repair that she got it done by a local tradesman out of her own pocket. Two participants reported that their local authority flats had mould/damp and crumbling walls, with the mould causing one participant's son to fall ill. They had faced serious challenges in getting the council to pay for the cost of repairs.

Fuel poverty was another issue linked to housing. Many of the houses that participants lived in were said to be older local authority houses that are hard to heat. With many participants being reliant upon Universal Credit, they said that they found the costs of heating their homes to be unaffordable.

The lack of suitable housing for larger families was also raised by participants, with overcrowding being a common occurrence. For example, one participant said that they lived in a two bedroom house along with their partner and three children.

The private rental sector believed to be impossible to access for many, with it being said that most private lets in the area not being let to people relying on social security to get by. The social housing sector in the area was said to be in need of serious investment, with long waiting lists for both local authority and housing association properties. For example, one participant had one participant told of how they had to move back in with their parents (as did their partner), which meant they lived apart. They had two children and were due a third child, but could not get access to any three-bedroom house in the area.

It was believed by some participants that the scale of private housing developments in the last decade in some communities in Midlothian, such as Penicuik, has skewed the SIMD statistics and made it appear as though there is less poverty in the area as there is.

Social security

Across most discussions, people's experiences of the social security system were almost entirely negative, particularly in relation to Universal Credit.

Some participants reported that the main earner in their family was self-employed, and that because of this their wages fluctuated from month to month. It was felt that Universal Credit was not able to adequately respond to this, with some people being left with no income at all some months.

Other people highlighted the loss of income that they had experienced on Universal Credit. For example, one participant had lost £800 per month (due mainly to the combined effect of the benefit cap and the two-child limit) once they moved onto Universal Credit. As a result, they gave up work as they could no longer afford the cost of childcare. In addition, they were also pulled into debt as a direct result of the five-week wait for their first Universal Credit payment. and ended up having to give up work as she couldn't afford childcare as a result. She was also in debt due to the 5-week waiting period.

Delays in payments and payment simply being stopped were also common occurrences for some participants. For example, one participant reported they the Disability Living Allowance they received for their autistic son was stopped without just cause. This meant that they found it even more challenging to find employment due to the need to dedicate more time to caring for their son. Another participant reported delays in receiving a Discretionary Housing Payment, resulting in them taking a 'pay day' loan.

There were also issues raised in relation to accessing welfare rights and money advice. Although some community facilities, such as Sure Start centres do provide money advice via the local Citizens Advice Bureau, most people found out what social security support and help was available for themselves, through internet searching or by word of mouth. Most participants were unaware, for example, of the Scottish Welfare Fund.

Finally, participants felt that local JobCentres did not fully understand the difficulties associated with parents attending appointments, given the barriers presented by childcare and transport.

Free school meals

Some parents who took part in discussions reported experiencing problems with Midlothian Council's free school meals application forms, in relation to what the council will accept as evidence of their entitlement.

For example, it was stated that the council email confirmations of entitlement from HMRC or the Department for Work and Pensions, and instead insist on paper copies. However, participants noted that most claims to the Department for Work and Pensions and HMRC are submitted online, with confirmation correspondence being primarily paperless. This not only represents a barrier to access but can be a cause of anxiety and stress for parents.

Employment

There was agreement in some discussions that there was a lack of decent, well-paid jobs in the local labour market. While better employment opportunities were available in Edinburgh, the higher wages on offer were believed to be offset by

In terms of work there was a lack of decent, well paid jobs locally. Travelling to better paid jobs in Edinburgh would be offset by transport costs and possible extra childcare costs.

Food insecurity

Experiences of food insecurity were raised in a number of the discussions. One participant spoke of their experiencing of using a foodbank on three occasions, and of having to travel four miles to access it due to there being no foodbank or alternative provision where they lived (in Mayfield).

Exacerbating the experience of people in some communities, such as Mayfield, was the absence of local supermarkets. This meant that people often either had to buy food at more expensive local shops, or had to rely on local bus services which can be extremely expensive.

Most participants were of the belief that food insecurity – particularly food insecurity affecting families during the school holidays – needed to be tackled in a more meaningful and systematic way; one which was not simply about ameliorating the short-term impact of food insecurity but which addressed food insecurity as its root cause.

Childcare

There was said to be a lack of nursery and childcare provision in many communities. One parent reported having no local childcare providers in their area, meaning that they had to either rely on an expensive bus service in order to access their child's childcare provider or walk several miles to get there.

As well as the availability of childcare, affordability was also said to be a critical issue. As one participant noted, *"the cost of a private nursery means it wouldn't be worthwhile working. All my wages would go on childcare fees."*

Education

The cost of the school day was a major issue for many of the participants, with school trips being particularly prohibitively expensive for many parents on low incomes. For example, one parent told of how a school trip to the nearby ski centre (Midlothian Snowsports Centre at Hillend, Edinburgh) cost £60 per child (even at the subsidised rate). For many families this was simply unaffordable, meaning that their children missed out.

Disabilities

For participants whose children had disabilities, there were said to be a number of additional challenges that could make it more difficult to get by. For example, there was a reported lack of support during school holidays, especially the long summer holidays. Parents whose children had additional needs spoke of how the absence of additional support during the school holidays could be challenging for both them and their children.

Participants also spoke about the stigma attached to poverty, and how stigma associated with disability could intersect and exacerbate this experience.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Community facilities and activities

A number of suggestions were made to improve the use of community facilities and activities in order to better support people living on low incomes. These include:

- The development of more activity programmes aimed at children during the school holidays, with these programmes either being free or very low cost;
- School facilities to be open for community use during the school holidays;
- Additional financial support for youth clubs and other activities for young people outside of school hours;
- The establishment of community hubs, to act as a central source of information, advice and signposting.

Free school meals

With some participants reporting challenges in evidencing free school meal entitlement to Midlothian Council, the recommendation from participants was:

- A review of the free school meal application process, with all efforts being made to ensure the process is as accessible as possible for parents;
- Free school meals to be made available to all children at school, not just primary 1-3.

Housing

The lack of affordable housing in the area was an issue raised by a number of participants. Key proposals for change included:

- Investment in and prioritisation of – at a local and national government level – the building of more social housing;
- Investment in more sheltered housing, which could help to free up larger houses for families;
- Additional support from the Scottish Government to enable families on low incomes to get access to mortgages;

- Investment in more locally-based housing advice services;
- More action from the local authority to improve the quality of the housing under its control, for example by investing in more measures to make homes more energy efficient and reduce fuel poverty.

Social Security

Social security was a key issue for many participants in discussions, with a range of action needing to be taken at local and national level in order to improve people's experiences. These included:

- Ending the five-week wait for first Universal Credit payments;
- Making advance payments for Universal Credit non-repayable;
- Investing in more welfare rights and income maximisation services, to improve people's understanding of their social security entitlements – as well as wider entitlements like school clothing grants and free school meals – and support them in accessing those entitlements.

Employment

While some participants had positive experiences of employment, there was also a feeling from participants that there were insufficient employment opportunities in Midlothian that were well-paid, secure, and – importantly for parents, particularly lone parents – flexible. Key proposals for action included:

- Increased support for flexible working, with the Scottish Government going further to encourage/incentivise employers to provide flexible options for workers;
- Additional support for people looking for work, for example local job fairs organised by the local authority;
- More employability support for lone parents.

CONCLUSION

The clear theme to emerge from all of the GHS discussions that took place across the Midlothian 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 Midlothian; the grip of poverty is tightening on the lives of too many people.

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 like Sure Start Midlothian, 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 Midlothian. Whether utilising community facilities more creatively in order to provide free activities for young people, reviewing the provision of free school meals, or investing in welfare rights services, there is much action that can be taken to boost incomes, reduce costs, and ease the pressure on families across Midlothian.



The Poverty Alliance

94 Hope Street

Glasgow

G2 6PH

www.povertyalliance.org

0141 353 0440

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