



NORTH AYRSHIRE

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.¹

North Ayrshire is an area with high levels of poverty and inequality, and has one of the highest levels of child poverty of any local authority area in Scotland, with an estimated 27% of children living in poverty. Significant variations in levels of child poverty do exist

across the region. For example, child poverty levels range from 34% in Saltcoats and Stevenston and 32% in Irvine West to 16% in North Coast and Cumbrae.² The area also has higher than average levels of unemployment, with an unemployment rate of 6% compared to the Scotland-wide figure of 3.9%.³

It is for these reasons, as well as the fact that North Ayrshire Council is implementing a range of ambitious and innovative approaches to tackling poverty and inequality across the region, that North Ayrshire was one of the key geographical target areas for GHS in 2019/20.

BACKGROUND

10 GHS discussions took place in North Ayrshire between July 2019 and December 2019, with around 115 people in total taking part in these discussions. These discussions were facilitated either by community development workers from North Ayrshire Council or by Poverty Alliance staff, and took place in partnership with organisations, services and projects such as:

- Centrestage
- Stevenson Library
- Garnock Valley Men's Sheds
- North Ayrshire Disability Alliance
- Garnock Valley Youth Forum
- Kilwinning Junior and Senior Youth Forum
- Kilwinning Academy Accredited Learning Group
- Café Solace
- North Ayrshire Youth Conference

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/>

³ Office for National Statistics, *Labour Market Profile – North Ayrshire*, <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/1a/1946157425/report.aspx>

WHAT'S WORKING?

Community food initiatives

Across a number of discussions, local initiatives that support people experiencing food insecurity were spoken about in positive terms and were clearly considered to be an important pillar of support for people who are struggling to get by.

While local foodbanks were said by some participants to be well-run and well-supported by communities, initiatives that provided food in more 'dignified' ways were agreed by participants to be particularly positive and to represent a better approach.

For example, Café Solace – a café run and staffed by volunteers who are in recovery from addiction – provides low-cost meals for people living in Ardrossan and Saltcoats. It was said to provide a real source of support for people who are finding it difficult to afford food, as well as people who may be at risk of experiencing social isolation and loneliness, which can be a common experience faced by people living in poverty. As Café Solace is open to any member of the community, this was said to minimise any stigma that might be associated with attending it.

Also mentioned by some participants in discussions was Centrestage, and its Dignified Food provision model that involves the dignified provision of food alongside the provision of wider social activities as well as advice and support.

Schemes for children during the school holidays that also provide food in addition to social activities were said to be hugely-valued in terms of addressing food insecurity in a more dignified way. For example,

Centrestage run cooking classes involving children and adults during the school holidays, which involves the preparation and provision of meals to participants.

Other projects mentioned that provide food in a dignified way included Garnock Valley Men's Shed and Parklives.

Community organisations

A key theme throughout all of the discussions that took place was the strong and valued role that local community organisations across North Ayrshire play in supporting living people on low incomes.

Centrestage was spoken about by participants as providing an important support for many families, and was said to deliver a range of valued services, for example food initiatives, cooking classes, classes for children, as well as access to information and advice that families may need.

Café Solace was said to be hugely valuable not just in terms of providing low cost meals, but also in terms of signposting people to advice and support, as well as the role that it plays in providing volunteering opportunities to people in recovery (who can be at heightened risk of experiencing poverty).

Other community projects that were referenced by discussion participants include The Mobile Cinema – run by Ardrossan Church of the Nazarene – which provides low-cost entry. This was deemed to be particularly helpful for families who may be unable to afford high ticket prices at mainstream cinemas, and means children can go to the cinema without it being a major cost for their family.

There were also a number of local informal groups mentioned by participants that have organised 'swap shops' and uniform banks for children's clothes and school uniforms, which was said to help to ease the pressure on families who are struggling to afford the cost of school clothes.

Broadly, it was keenly felt by participants that local organisations who provide universal access to their services were strongly favoured over those whose provision was more targeted. It was felt that universal access to services and initiatives removed a lot of the stigma associated with particular services and with living on a low income more generally.

Participants generally found out about local community initiatives through word of mouth, rather than through any advertising or other routes.

Social security

While the majority of discussions related to social security were not positive, some aspects of the social security system – both the Scottish social security system and the UK social security system – were said to be working well and providing vital support to people living on low incomes.

For example, child benefit and child tax credits were spoken about at one discussion as being of particular importance to families living on low incomes; providing a broadly secure (if diminishing, in terms of the level of cash support provided) source of income for those families accessing them.

With regards to the social security entitlements now being delivered by the Scottish social security system, Healthy Start vouchers were spoken about in one discussion as being supportive in enabling low income families to access healthy food that they may not otherwise be able to afford.

While Universal Credit was spoken about in broadly negative terms throughout a number of discussions, the introduction of Scottish Choices – enabling individuals to receive their payments fortnightly and enabling the housing component of Universal Credit to be paid directly to landlords – was said by some participants to represent a positive step forward.

Cost of education

With the cost of the school day representing a major financial burden on low income families, a number of interventions and supports were said to be of great help in reducing these costs.

These included free school meals (currently available to all children up to primary 3 and to qualifying children from primary 4 and upwards), school clothing grants, and – where available and accessible – school breakfast clubs.

Community services

A number of services delivered by the local authority were spoken about in discussions as being of particular importance to people living on low incomes in North Ayrshire.

Local libraries, for example, were said by some participants to provide them with essential access to PCs and the internet. For people who may otherwise be without digital access, this was said to help not only with general access to information, but also with employability and – crucially – with the management of Universal Credit applications.

Employability hubs – of which there are a number across North Ayrshire – were also highlighted as being extremely helpful in terms of supporting people into work as well as signposting people to wider support services that they may be able to access.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING?

Transport

One of the most commonly-raised issues across a number of the discussions that took place was transport, and in particular the affordability and availability of transport for people living on low incomes.

With regards to the availability of transport, a number of participants – particularly young participants from less well-connected areas such as Kilbirnie – spoke of how their communities were extremely poorly-served by public transport. This was said to lead to feelings of social isolation and of being 'cut off' from the kinds of services and opportunities that they wanted to access.

With regards to the affordability of transport, a number of participants spoke of how the cost of public transport in North Ayrshire was simply too high. This acted as a barrier to families accessing the services that they needed, and was also said to prevent children from low income families accessing the same activities and opportunities as their peers.

For example, while there are a number of school breakfast clubs for children across North Ayrshire, it was said to be extremely difficult for many low income families to manage transport to get their children to these clubs. School holidays were also said to be particularly challenging for families on low incomes, in terms of being able to cover the costs of transport.

At one discussion, participants spoke of how limited and/or unaffordable transport options meant that their employment options were limited. Particularly for younger workers, expensive transport combined with the low pay on offer in jobs available to them meant

that any money earned through employment was almost entirely or partially spent on traveling to work.

At one discussion, a number of participants were resettled Syrian refugees. They spoke of the challenges that they had in being able to access shops that accommodated their religious/cultural dietary requirements. With no shops in the immediate area able to cater to these requirements, they told of having to travel to other areas in order to meet their needs. With the cost of transport being so high, they had to spend significant sums of money purely to meet their cultural and religious needs.

Food insecurity

Food insecurity – i.e. the inability to afford food – was raised by a number of participants as being a key issue across North Ayrshire, as evidenced by the number of food banks that have been established in recent years in response. While foodbanks were not seen as a solution to food insecurity, it was clear that many people relied upon them when experiencing income crisis.

However it was also clear that there were some issues with how some local foodbanks were operating. For example, one participant spoke of how they had been told that they were only permitted three trips to a local food bank. There was concern that this approach could mean that people experiencing income crisis – who may not have been made aware of the support they could access via the Scottish Welfare Fund – are left destitute or that their food insecurity could be exacerbated yet further.

Social security

Issues related to social security emerged in a number of the discussions that took place, with a significant proportion of these issues relating to problems around Universal Credit. For example, the five week wait for first Universal Credit payments were said to be causing huge problems across North Ayrshire, with people being left in poverty, destitution and experiencing food insecurity.

In terms of the delivery of social security, the application of sanctions was also raised in one discussion. Sanctions were agreed by participants to be unjust and – in their view – often applied entirely arbitrarily. For example, one participant reported being sanctioned because they were unable to make an early morning job interview in Glasgow due to not having enough money for the train fare. The experience of sanctioning served only to deepen the poverty they were experiencing and to exacerbate feelings of resentment towards the JobCentre and the social security system more broadly.

At a discussion in Saltcoats, it was strongly felt that advice and support from the local JobCentre can be inconsistent, and that the level and quality of support and service received was largely dependent upon the individual work coach that people were assigned.

Employment

It was felt in a number of the discussions that opportunities for employment in North Ayrshire – and particularly ‘good’ employment that wasn’t low-paid or insecure – were limited.

Across a number of discussions with younger people, there were strong concerns expressed about the use of zero hours contracts, which were felt to be

disproportionately utilised in sectors or roles where a significant number of the workers are young workers. The insecurity that zero hours contracts introduce were said to have an overwhelmingly negative impact on young workers’ ability to budget or plan, particularly given that this type of employment can also often be low-paid.

Young people involved in discussions also felt extremely strongly that younger workers should not be paid less than older workers who are undertaking the same work, and that existing national minimum wage legislation – which allows for young workers to be paid less than older workers – was entirely unjust and unfair.

It was stated by some participants that most employment opportunities were based in Glasgow. Given the cost of commuting to Glasgow, participants felt that this could be unaffordable, particularly if the employment was low-paid and/or insecure.

At one discussion, it was noted that while employability schemes made a positive impact on people, they needed to be more sustainable, permanent and consistent. It was stated that some existing employability schemes can be one-year projects, which do not allow for maximum and lasting impact for individuals.

Social/leisure activities and opportunities

Some participants discussed the lack of free and/or accessible social groups, clubs and facilities that exist in their communities. It was said that this could mean that people were locked out from accessing the same kind of social connections and activities as people with higher incomes, with a resultant impact on both physical and mental health and wellbeing.

A key concern for many of the parents who participated in discussions was the lack of affordable cultural, leisure and sporting activities for their children. A number of parents reported that while extra-curricular activities and opportunities do exist, they were often unaffordable for families living on low incomes (especially for families with more than two children). Swimming lessons, for example, were cited as being simply unaffordable for families who are struggling to get by.

Education

Concerns about the cost of the school day were common across many discussions, including the cost of uniforms and extra-curricular activities. The young people that we spoke with were acutely aware of these cost pressures, and particularly how they interacted with the stigma that they felt exists within schools in relation to living on a low incomes.

They referenced the high cost of school trips and activities, for example, and the pressure that they can feel for their families to pay for these trips and activities, even if their family is living on a low income. They also spoke of how activities like school proms are now considered to be an essential part of their school experience, but how these can be extremely expensive. For families living on low incomes, they were said to be hugely challenging to pay for and can be the cause of anxiety and stress.

Young people that took part in discussions also expressed concern about the cost of further and higher education. Some said they were worried about the possible cost of transitioning to college or university, in terms of the cost of textbooks, travel and other necessary resources. It was felt that the wider costs associated with further and higher education could put young people from low incomes families off continuing their education when they leave school, given their reluctance to accumulate additional debt.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Social security

At the UK level, it was strongly agreed across a number of discussions that the five week wait for Universal Credit has to end, due to the way in which it is pulling people into poverty in communities across North Ayrshire and the rest of the country. It was also strongly felt that, while advance payments for Universal Credit are now available, these only serve to push people into more debt; causing greater financial difficulties and anxiety in the longer-term. A system of non-repayable advance payments was proposed in its place.

Other suggestions for change – of relevance at UK, Scottish and local levels – included:

- Providing additional social security support for lone parents, given their heightened risk of experiencing poverty;
- Streamlining all application processes for social security entitlements so that people did not have to make multiple applications, and creating a system whereby individual's details (with their permission) could be shared across multiple different services (e.g. Social Security Scotland and local authorities) to ensure that they are accessing all of their entitlements;
- Ensuring that disability assessments are carried out by appropriately trained and qualified professionals.

Transport

A number of suggestions were made in relation to improving the affordability and availability of transport in North Ayrshire. These included:

- The local authority (or other relevant local bodies) engaging with bus providers to support the provision of free bus travel at certain times (e.g. during school holidays) or for certain groups (e.g. people in receipt of Universal Credit);
- Local bus providers providing concessionary travel for families/parents with more than two children;
- The local authority to work with bus providers and other relevant bodies to ensure that there are better links from main places of habitation to the kind of essential services and facilities (e.g. health services, cheaper supermarkets, areas of employment) that people rely upon and need to access;
- Greater community involvement in the planning of transport services, to ensure that services meet people's needs.

Community services

In one discussion, **there was strong agreement that the establishment of more 'one stop shops' for people – which could incorporate a range of different services related to health, welfare rights or housing advice that they may need – would be hugely beneficial.** It was said that this could help to both provide support to people and signpost them to wider support that they may need.

In one discussion, it was felt that **more aftercare was required in the community for people with addictions as well as people who have just been released from prison;** with both of these groups also being at heightened risk of experiencing poverty.

Health services

The relationship between poverty and health (especially mental health) was raised in some discussions, and it was noted that there is a long waiting list for the Three Towns Resource Centre (a community mental health centre). **Additional support and investment – both from local and national government – in mental health services was therefore felt to be essential,** particularly given the mutually reinforcing dynamic that exists between poverty and mental health.

Community involvement and engagement

Participants agreed on the importance of community engagement and community involvement as a means of ensuring that local services were meeting the needs of people living on low incomes. It was suggested that **even more emphasis is placed on community engagement and in ensuring that communities are able to have influence and control over decisions and resources** that impact them.

Leisure activities

With the cost of leisure and extracurricular activities being a commonly-raised issue across a number of discussions, **participants believed in the need for the local authority to support more free – or at least low cost – activities, clubs and schemes for children.**

Education

The cost of the school day can represent a significant financial burden on families living on low incomes. Key suggestions for change included:

- Creating a central school uniform outlet in order to reduce costs.

- Implementing strict uniform policies – including related to shoes and school bags – in order to reduce any possibility of stigma associated with school clothes.
- Initiating and supporting local clothing, shoes and toy swap shops, enabling good quality clothes, shoes and toys to be re-used.

It was also proposed by some of the young people that we spoke with that **schools should have more awareness and education sessions related to poverty, to help young people better understand the causes of and solutions to poverty.** It was felt that this could help both reduce stigma and help to build broader support for solving poverty. Relatedly, **it was also proposed by some young people that financial education should be taught in schools.**

Young people also spoke strongly in favour of **more resources being put into bursaries for young people from low income families who want to access further or higher education.**

Employment

With concerns about unemployment and about the lack of ‘good’ employment in the area, key suggestions for change at national and local levels included:

- Increased childcare entitlement – over and above the planned extension of childcare funded by the Scottish Government – to help parents, particularly lone parents, access employment;
- Additional support for schemes like ‘Remploy’ that support disabled people into – and help them sustain – employment;
- Increased commitment by employers – both in the public and private sectors – to ensure that workplaces are accessible for and inclusive of disabled people;
- More action to increase the numbers of people being paid at least the real Living Wage;
- More on insecure working practices like zero hours contracts;
- Equalising the minimum wage and National Living Wage to ensure that younger and older workers are paid the same for undertaking the same work.

CONCLUSION

The clear theme to emerge from all of the GHS discussions that took place across North Ayrshire 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 North Ayrshire; 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 delivered by North Ayrshire Council, 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 loosen the grip of poverty. Whether by working with schools to reflect on how to further reduce the cost of the school day and to deliver poverty awareness sessions, or by working more closely with local bus providers to ensure that the transport system works for people on low incomes, there is much action that can be taken to boost incomes, reduce costs, and ease the pressure on families across North Ayrshire.



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