

# BRIEFING

## GET HEARD SCOTLAND IN RENFREWSHIRE: VOICES FROM THE THIRD SECTOR

### 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 and with the organisations that support people affected by poverty – 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.

### Background

Between August and October 2020, the Poverty Alliance carried out interviews with 11 organisations that work with people living on low incomes in Renfrewshire.

These included:

- Kairos Women's Group
- Renfrewshire Young Carers
- Barnardos Threads
- The One Initiative
- Recovery Across Mental Health (RAMH)
- Pachedu
- Linstone Housing
- Renfrewshire Citizens Advice Bureau
- Renfrewshire Adult Carers
- The Star Project
- Wise Group

These interviews focused predominantly on the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had both on the organisations themselves and on the people that they work with, with a particular focus on the themes of employment; mental health; digital exclusion, and community support.

This briefing provides a summary of the key themes and points to emerge from these discussions. Further work will be undertaken to expand upon this evidence base, with work already being undertaken to conduct interviews with people with lived experience of poverty in Renfrewshire about the impact of the pandemic on them, as well as their key ideas for change.

## Key themes

### **Organisational responses & impact**

Almost all of the organisations interviewed had redesigned or adapted their services in response to the pandemic, primarily through shifting the provision of face-to-face services so that they were delivered online (e.g. via Zoom or Facebook, for services like group classes) or via the telephone. In the case of one organisation, this has led to a more than halving of the numbers of people engaging with them.

For most organisations interviewed, this reconfiguration of services occurred alongside a significant increase in demand. For example, RAMH had to introduce a new telephone helpline in response to the steep rise in requests for support that they received during the initial phase of lockdown.

### *Organisational impact*

The need to both redesign services and support staff to work from home has led to an increased financial burden on a number of the organisations interviewed. One, for example reported spending more than £40,000 upgrading computers and laptops to enable staff to work from home. Training was also required to enable staff to use new IT systems to facilitate home working.

### *Funding*

A number of the organisations interviewed reporting accessing funding that had been made available in response to the pandemic. For example, one organisation had accessed grants from the Scottish Government's Wellbeing Fund, to purchase and distribute tablets to their service users.

## Employment

*“The (people) that I work with that have been employed, it hasn’t been a great experience for them during lockdown. One in particular, she works a lot of hours, although she was only on a small contract and then when she was furloughed, she was always just furloughed on her contracted hours, so it’s been a huge drop in her wages.”*

A key concern for a number of interviewees was the short and long-term impact of the pandemic on employment in Renfrewshire. In terms of the employment impact already seen, interviewees highlighted the cuts in income experienced by many people in-work as a result of unemployment or furlough, and noted the disproportionate impact that had been felt by women (particularly women with children, and particularly women who were lone parents), people from Black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds, and young people. One organisation said that they have been supporting increasing numbers of people who were previously unknown to their services, particularly people who are employed in the gig economy and younger people.

Broadly, the pandemic was said to have exposed existing labour market inadequacies, for example the prevalence of insecure employment for young people:

*“It just makes you realise how many extra hours young people always end up working, they’re always contracted on such a small, like 10, 12 hour contracts, but every week they were working full-time hours and a situation like this is brought it home, just how exploitive that is.”*

There was also concern expressed across a number of interviews about the potential impact on people who were long-term unemployed prior to the pandemic; many of whom face additional barriers to employment. Carers were raised as one such group, with their caring responsibilities often preventing them from engaging in employment support initiatives like Fair Start Scotland, or from accessing employment opportunities (due to those opportunities often not providing flexible working hours). There was said to be a particular need for more referrals for young carers to organisations like Skills Development Scotland and Prince’s Trust, to help them get advice on employment and further education opportunities.

Other groups highlighted as facing existing barriers to employment were people with mental health issues, people with experience of the criminal justice system, and older women. Given the increasing numbers of people becoming unemployed, there was a fear that these groups may become even further excluded from the labour market.

The impact of the pandemic on young people's employment was raised as a particular concern in a number of interviews, with the sectors most impacted by the pandemic also being those that disproportionately employ young people. The Future Jobs Fund was highlighted as a positive support for unemployed young people, but was considered too short-term to provide young people with meaningful learning and development opportunities. It was proposed that the Fund – and those interventions like it – should be delivered for longer than six months to make them more beneficial.

The need for investment in flexible employability support was raised by interviewees, as was the need for that support to be informed by specialist knowledge in how to support people with mental health issues. This could be done, it was suggested, by employing more trained mental health support advisors in the employment advice sector.

### **Mental health**

*“You cannot be well when you are worried about your financial stability.”*

The mental health impact of the pandemic on people on low incomes living in Renfrewshire has been significant. For people living with mental health issues prior to the crisis, the loss of vital supports and connections – for example the closure of gyms and libraries – was said to have made their issues more acute. At the same time, many people have been experiencing mental health issues for the first time. RAMH, for example, have experienced a significant increase in the number of requests for support, with counselling requests more than doubling from April to August.

One organisation reported evidence of an increase in the numbers of people experiencing mental health crisis and hospitalisation, as well as evidence of higher incidences of suicidal thoughts. Exacerbating this was said to be long waiting lists for specialist mental health care, with people on low incomes unable to afford private mental health care such as counselling, and it was felt that investment in services to widen access was essential:

*“A three month wait for someone in crisis is no help at all.”*

*“Yeah, I think it's not going to go away now, there will be further services needed to cope with this now.”*

Particular groups have been disproportionately impacted. This includes lone parents – the vast majority of whom are women – who, particularly in the early stages of the crisis, were cut off from vital supports and social connections:

*“There was a period at the beginning where a lot of my young people, it was total isolation, them and their baby and that's when a lot of mental health problems started to surface.”*

Carers also faced, and continue to face, significant mental health challenges. Renfrewshire Carers, for example, reported undertaking a survey with their service users to find out the impact of Covid-19 on their lives. Most people said that their mental health and wellbeing had been affected by the isolation of lockdown, made worse by having no access to day-care centres or respite care.

Some initiatives helped to overcome the challenges presented by the closure of centres though, with Renfrewshire Young Carer's, for example, delivering activities for young carers like an allotment group that allowed them to learn new skills and that helped reduce their social isolation and loneliness. Partnership working between third sector organisations was highlighted positively, with Pachedu, for example, working in partnership with RAMH to encourage BAME people with mental health issues to access RAMH services through a referral system. Some supports that had been set up in response to the pandemic were also highlighted as important, for example the helpline for mental wellbeing support that had been established by Renfrewshire Council in partnership with local organisations.

However, despite this it was felt that, fundamentally, working with people with mental health issues requires face to face meetings to enable staff to pick up on issues that cannot be noticed online or via telephone. In the event of future or ongoing lockdowns, the continuing provision of face to face services would therefore be important.

Finally, the links between unemployment and mental health were raised in a number of interviews, with concern that rising levels of unemployment will further exacerbate the mental health issues being experienced by people on low incomes in the months ahead.

### **Digital access**

*"If you are having to choose to eat or heat, digital access is not a priority."*

All organisations interviewed spoke about the impact that digital exclusion has had on people living on low incomes through the course of the pandemic. While this digital exclusion existed pre-pandemic, it was exacerbated both by the shift to delivering services online and by the closure of services like local libraries, which many people without internet access at home use to access digital services and information.

This heightened exclusion resulted in barriers to services, support and information, and had particular implications for many children during the period of school closures. Larger families were said to have especially struggled, with devices having to be shared between children in order to carry out schoolwork. Even if families had access to the internet at home, basic internet connections often did not provide enough bandwidth to enable multiple children to access it at the same time.

A lack of mobile phone data also presented a challenge for many people on low incomes. Organisations sought to respond to this, however:

*“The cost of data was a problem at the beginning, but we did have access to the Wellbeing Fund, to the COVID Wellbeing Fund so we were accessing money through that for people to get extra... that they could spend on extra data if they wanted, and also just extra living expenses of food and fuel.”*

Some organisations reported a significant reduction in the numbers of people accessing their services after being forced to move them online. One, for example, reported ordinarily having at least 30 people accessing their sessions. After moving the sessions online, numbers fell to between 6 and 10 on average, at least in part due to a lack of digital devices or access to the internet at home. Others had worked hard, particularly in the first phase of lockdown to adapt their services to allow them to be delivered online, and had maintained good engagement with people. This required organisations to be very flexible in order to adapt, and to develop new skills in very short periods of time. Flexibility of this kind was only possible due to the flexibility of funders, who trusted organisations to adapt and change their services as they best saw fit.

A number of initiatives aimed at tackling digital exclusion were highlighted. The provision of laptops, smart phones and tablets by Renfrewshire Council, local housing associations and third sector organisations were said to have made a positive impact.

It was noted, though, that access to devices had to be accompanied by efforts to boost incomes (to enable people to pay for internet and electricity at home) and by providing them with the digital skills that many people – particularly older people – do not have. It was highlighted in one interview that there was previously a project in Renfrewshire that brought together young people with older people to support them in gaining digital skills. This kind of project was considered to be something to build on in the future in order to address the digital skills gap that exists.

Finally, a number of interviewees were clear that, even with efforts to provide equipment and digital skills, there was still a clear need to ensure that services and support are available in non-digital ways too for anyone who does not wish to engage digitally.

### **Community support**

*“I think it’s been great inter-agency working throughout this. There has been great communication. A lot of my time is spent speaking to various departments in the council, I think they were set up really well throughout it.”*

*“We have more links than we had before, and we work more closely with other organisations than before. We are definitely working more with the council too.”*

The organisations interviewed spoke in positive terms about the local response to the pandemic, and about the collaborative and integrated way in which the third sector and local authority worked in Renfrewshire to meet the needs of communities. Key to this was said to be the early recognition that partnership working was essential, rather than isolated stand-alone interventions and initiatives. Renfrewshire Council were also praised by one interviewee for their work in supporting local community groups in accessing different sources of funding to support their response.

Moving forward, it was deemed to be vital that this partnership working continues. One suggestion for enabling this was to re-design funding processes to be less competitive and to encourage much more collaboration between organisations, rather than pitting organisations against one another. It was also believed to be important to support and strengthen the role of the third sector interface in facilitating the sharing of information and coordination of work that is being carried out across Renfrewshire.

One barrier to this, though, is the ongoing financial pressures faced by third and community sector organisations. While this was an issue pre-pandemic – with smaller organisations in particular often being unable to build on successful projects or provide real job security for staff – the additional demand for services is now placing organisations under greater strain. Although many have benefitted from support from sources like the Wellbeing Fund, there was concern expressed about what would happen when this funding ran out, with a belief in the need to recognise the vital role played by the third sector by ensuring this level of investment continues:

*“The Wellbeing Fund should be a long-term fund, not just for the pandemic emergency response.”*

One of the positive aspects of the community response to the pandemic in Renfrewshire was the mobilisation of volunteers to support the work of community and third sector organisations. Interviewees believed there was an opportunity to build on this mobilisation, through investment in volunteers and in ensuring that volunteer work provides volunteers with the kind of skills that may help them engage or progress in the labour market.

Finally, several interviewees spoke of how the community response to the pandemic had fostered a greater sense of community cohesion, with greater solidarity and mutual support. One organisation got funding, for example, through sponsored walks that had been organised by the community, with the donations used to provide a hardship fund to service users who were struggling to stay afloat.

One interviewee said:

*“Just speaking to my young people there’s just a lot more awareness of their neighbours and of the people round about them and what they can do to help each other and just a lot nicer. I hear a lot more kindness, to be honest.”*

## **Other issues**

### *Engagement with BAME communities*

In several interviews, it was highlighted that many local organisations are not fully engaged with – or may find it difficult to fully engage with – BAME communities. As a result, the needs of BAME communities in Renfrewshire may not be fully known or understood. It was also suggested that some BAME communities may be less likely to seek support from services due to perceived stigma.

### *Access to discretionary funds*

Following investment in the Scottish Welfare Fund by the Scottish Government at the outset of the pandemic, one interviewee reported that a more of the Scottish Welfare Fund applications that they had supported people to make were being accepted. This was hugely beneficial for the individuals making the application, but the interviewee believed that prior to the additional investment, many of the applications would have been rejected.

This points to Scottish Welfare Fund decision-making processes not always being based on need, but on available budget. It is essential that, in future, the Scottish Welfare Fund receives the level of long-term investment required to enable all local authorities to respond to need, and not to be constrained by limited budgets.

While access to the Scottish Welfare Fund was said to have increased since March, there were ongoing issues highlighted in relation to access to Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP), with Renfrewshire Council's DHP allocation not being able to meet the demand.

### *Shielding*

Renfrewshire Adult Carers reported that some carers in Renfrewshire look after people who are severely disabled or have long-term conditions but who did not receive shielding letters during the period of initial lockdown. This meant that those people and their carers were not entitled to the enhanced support available from Renfrewshire Council. This led to increased stress and anxiety among carers.

### *Council tax arrears*

One interviewee highlighted concern over the additional debt that people may have accrued since March 2020, with council tax arrears being a particular concern due to the way in which it can be “aggressively collected”:

*“We do find that therefore, it (council tax debt) does impact people who are on the lowest income, because they are the ones who are maybe more likely to fall into council tax arrears. Not massive amounts from a debt perspective, but lots for an individual. But, they feel like they’ve got no hope of repaying it. And we do find that often the sheriff officer sometimes can be very difficult to negotiate with.”*



While it was welcome that council tax arrears had not been pursued as forcefully since the start of the pandemic, concern remained that this approach would resume and that it would disproportionately impact people on low incomes. It was felt that flexibility should be shown in collecting council tax arrears, including ensuring that payment plans were as flexible as possible.

#### *Access to welfare rights & other advice*

With an increasing number of people turning to the social security system for support following a cut in their working hours, furlough or unemployment, issues were reported in terms of being able to support people to make and manage their claims. Some of the service users that one organisation work with, for example, were said to struggle to fill out their online Universal Credit journals due to a lack of face-to-face support during the early stages of the pandemic.

While Renfrewshire CAB have continued to provide advice throughout the pandemic, outreach services in locations like GPs surgeries have stopped running. Given the important role that outreach services play in ensuring access to advice for people who may find it otherwise difficult to access, it was considered important to re-establish these services.

#### *Financial support for young carers*

A lack of financial support for young carers was raised as an issue that was pre-existing, but which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. With young carers who stay in school not being eligible for Carer's Allowance or Carer's Allowance Supplement, some feel forced to leave school to become full-time carers and therefore become eligible for financial support; thereby often locking them into poverty.

While the Scottish Government's Young Carer's Grant was said to be of help, it is only provided once a year and provides only fairly limited financial help. It is also only paid to one young person per household, even though there may be multiple young carers in a household looking after family members.

## Conclusion

The discussions that took place with third sector organisations across Renfrewshire and that are highlighted in this briefing make clear the enormous contribution that the sector has made – despite the significant organisational challenges they have faced – to the Covid-19 pandemic response in the area.

Whether through re-designing services to meet the evolving needs of people and communities, or through working in partnership to ensure that the response was as coordinated as possible, organisations across Renfrewshire have clearly played a critical role in supporting people living on low incomes through the worst of the economic and social storm that the pandemic has created.

But despite this, since March of last year the grip of poverty has clearly tightened on the lives of many people living across Renfrewshire. Like in all areas of the country, many people who were already living on low incomes have been pulled deeper into poverty, while many more have been swept into poverty for the first time. Mental health issues have been exacerbated for many, while issues like digital exclusion have acted as a barrier to services for many groups.

In the future there is a need not only to put in place the policy and practice interventions that will address the issues raised in this briefing, but also to ensure that organisations supporting people living on low incomes in Renfrewshire – as well as people living on low incomes themselves – are able to have an ever-greater influence over the decisions that are made around anti-poverty policy and strategy at the local and national levels. This briefing is intended to act as a contribution to this effort, to help inform both the response to the pandemic and Renfrewshire's broader response to poverty-related issues.

### **For more information please contact:**

Neil Cowan, Senior Policy and Parliamentary Officer, Poverty Alliance

[neil.cowan@povertyalliance.org](mailto:neil.cowan@povertyalliance.org)