

# Briefing: Get Heard Scotland in Inverclyde: An overview of initial discussions

## 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 10 organisations that work with people living on low incomes in Inverclyde. These included:

- Financial Fitness Inverclyde
- Belville Community Gardens
- Greenock Morton Community Trust
- Starter Packs Inverclyde
- CVS Inverclyde
- Your Voice Inverclyde Carers Forum
- Inverclyde Carers Centre
- Man On Inverclyde
- Kidron Project
- Inverclyde Development Trust
- Creative Inverclyde/Salvation Army

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 Inverclyde about the impact of the pandemic on them, as well as their key ideas for change.

## **Key themes**

### **Organisational responses**

#### *Reconfiguration of services*

In the initial phase of the pandemic, all organisations interviewed were forced to adapt or reconfigure their services in order to meet the needs of the people they work with. For example, by mobilising volunteers to deliver food parcels across the community in response to growing levels of food insecurity and to provide food to people who were shielding.

Some organisations who ordinarily provided face-to-face support and services shifted to digital engagement or undertook telephone check-ins with people to ensure that they were coping and had the money to meet their essential needs.

#### *Funding*

While demand for services has increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic, several organisations spoke of having been able to access a variety of different funds to enable them to adapt or develop their services. Funding sources that had been accessed by organisations included the Scottish Government's Third Sector Resilience Fund, Wellbeing Fund and Supporting Communities Fund, as well as Cash for Kids, Corra Foundation and funding from Inverclyde Council.

The additional funding that has been made available for community organisations in response to the pandemic has helped to offset the income cuts that many organisations have experienced due to the drop in donations and fundraising opportunities since March.

## Employment

*“The challenge is that there are not that many jobs for people to go to.”*

Interviewees were clear that, even pre-pandemic, Inverclyde already had a challenging and fragile labour market, with too many people – particularly young people – trapped in low-paid and insecure work and not enough employment opportunities in the local area.

There was a clear belief across almost all discussions that the pandemic will have served only to entrench these issues – particularly for young people – with rising levels of unemployment meaning that there will be greater competition for even fewer jobs. Interviewees expected there to be a large cohort of people (particularly older people) losing their jobs who have not been unemployed before, and who may not be aware of the services that can support them (or be aware of their social security entitlements). The numbers of people in this group are expected to rise further with the end of the UK Government's Job Retention Scheme, and it is expected that the need for support will increase in the months ahead.

Of particular concern for some interviewees was the impact that might be felt by people who, pre-pandemic, already found it more challenging to access the labour market, such as lone parents (who are overwhelmingly women), disabled people, carers (especially young carers), people with substance use issues, and people with mental health issues. For these groups, it was perceived that the impact of the pandemic may be to push them even further from the labour market. To quote one interviewee:

*“I think for two of the guys anyway, that I know definitely off hand, they struggled to get employment before COVID, so they are now thinking, “How am I going to get a job after this, when there is so many people that are struggling for it?”*

There was therefore felt to be a need, raised in a number of the discussions, for investment in good quality employability programmes to support those people who may require additional support to enter or re-enter the labour market. The employability service delivered by Inverclyde Community Development Trust was noted as one of the models of good practice in the local area in terms of supporting people into employment through a combination of pre-employment and ongoing on-the-job support.

It was also suggested that there was a need for even closer partnerships between local employers and employability support organisations and initiatives, to ensure that employability support does actually lead to positive employment outcomes.

Given the particular impact of the pandemic on young people's employment, there was strong support for the development of additional services focused on supporting them to develop the skills and work experiences they may need to support their access to employment. It was felt that this support has to be long-term, and has to support their access to decent work, rather than low-paid and insecure work.

Alongside the expected rise in demand and need for employability services, it was also raised that there is a need for the development of a strategy – bringing together the third sector, private sector, local authority and local communities – focused on reinvigorating the labour market in Inverclyde in the long-term; addressing the long-standing issues of unemployment and of a lack of jobs.

### **Mental health**

Since the onset of the pandemic, organisations have witnessed a steep rise in the numbers of people experiencing mental health issues. One organisation estimated that 7 in 10 of their service users are currently experiencing mental ill-health, compared with 1 in 10 prior to the pandemic. Some of the key drivers of this were:

- Worries and/or concerns about financial difficulties
- Increased cost of food and energy
- Extended waiting times for healthcare
- Ongoing impact of social isolation
- Additional stress on parents looking after children, including the pressures of online learning

Several organisations also reported a rise in suicidal ideation among the people they work with and support, with one organisation reporting anecdotal evidence of a rise in alcohol and substance misuse issues.

Exacerbating the mental health issues being experienced by people in Inverclyde was said to be long waiting lists for access to mental health services; an issue that pre-dates the pandemic but which has become more acute as access to these services have become even more restricted over the last seven months. This issue was said to be particularly pronounced for people living on low incomes, who cannot afford access to private mental health services. In the words of one interviewee:

*“What I find is, in Inverclyde, that if you have got issues with your mental health and you have got money in the bank, you will get seen very quickly by the organisations that make money off of counselling and stuff like that. But if you are living in poverty or you are living in deprivation, you are in a waiting list for a long period of time.”*

One interviewee stated that there is a lack of good, community-based support for people with mental health issues in Inverclyde. They said that, for men in particular, there can be a lack of support that is not football-related or men's sheds. Another interviewee noted the particular mental health impact of the last seven months on carers, who were unable to access the in-person services that can provide respite from their caring responsibilities.

Some good examples of community-based supports were highlighted, though. These included Man On Inverclyde, a peer support network for men to talk about their mental health, as well as services provided by Greenock Morton Community Trust, like walking groups. Other organisations have incorporated mental health elements into their wider services, for example by including leaflets about mental health services into food parcels.

### **Digital exclusion**

While a shift to digital services and engagement was said by some interviewees to have allowed them to reach people who would not ordinarily engage in community spaces, digital exclusion issues were considered across all interviews to be pronounced, and to have acted as a barrier to many people on low incomes being able to access the services (including health services) and support that they need, as well as limiting their opportunities to socialise remotely.

Older people were particularly likely to struggle with digital access, both because of a lack of equipment and a lack of digital skills. They were also said to be more likely to struggle with their confidence in using digital equipment, and to rely on their children or grandchildren to assist them in navigating digital support (something that has been much less possible during the time of the pandemic).

For some older people, a lack of digital skills was acting as a potentially significant barrier to employment, and a source of anxiety for them given the digital demands of the current labour market. Given the numbers of people expected to become unemployed in the coming months, this was viewed as an issue that would affect growing numbers of people.

During the time of school closures, a significant amount of work was undertaken by schools – assisted by organisations like Belville Community Gardens Trust – to purchase laptops and tablets for children and young people who would otherwise be at risk of digital exclusion.

Other local responses to digital exclusion were highlighted, with many organisations shifting their services online and others developing new services and resources to help people overcome digital exclusion. Your Voice Inverclyde, for example, trained ‘digital champions’ to provide digital skills training who would otherwise struggle to get online. Longer-term, it was felt that a greater local focus on delivering digital skills training would be an important resource. One interviewee said:

*“So I’m now thinking in light of all this about some form of permanent digital skills resource, either a person or relationships that we have so that we can provide digital connectivity, or devices, for those who are going to struggle to cover that themselves, but also the digital skills. We just don’t have capacity when we’re running these programs to take that on.”*

It was noted though, that even with efforts to provide equipment and digital skills, there is still a clear need to ensure that services and support are available in non-digital ways too. Ongoing face to face support was said to be particularly important for particular groups, including older people, carers, people with mental health issues, and people in recovery.

Finally, it was noted in one interview that the move to digital service delivery has led to an increased financial burden on smaller organisations, given the need to pay for video conferencing facilities and other digital platforms that can be prohibitively expensive. Additional support may be required for organisations in future to support a potentially more permanent shift to digital services, although it was noted that CVS Inverclyde set up a much-valued advice line for third sector organisations in order to help those that need support in navigating IT issues.

### **Community support & cohesion**

There was agreement across all interviews that third sector and community organisations responded well and with urgency from the start of the pandemic; something that was made possible because of a pre-existing culture of collaboration and partnership across Inverclyde, which was said to be fostered by CVS Inverclyde. One interviewee said:

*“You’ve got things like Inverclyde Life and Volunteer Inverclyde, a lot more kind of centralised hubs for information and circulating information, so that’s good. There’s more opportunities to meet and network together, so I think CVS have done a really good job at steering that.”*

This culture enabled organisations to act quickly in response to the growing and evolving needs of communities and was said to be crucial in delegating responsibilities according to areas of specialism.

It was felt that, moving forward through and out of the pandemic, it was vital that this culture of collaboration and partnership continued and that it was important that it continued to be encouraged and facilitated by CVS Inverclyde and Inverclyde Council. It was suggested that one way of doing this would be to deepen community involvement in local services, for example ensuring that communities were represented in the development of local services like GP services.

While collaboration across the third sector was viewed as a strong feature of the community response, it was noted by one interviewee that the relationship between the third sector and local authority in response to the pandemic was not as clearly defined as it could have been. In their words: *“In hindsight, it would have been good to have clear terms of reference for the (third sector) group and clarify the relationship with the council.”*

Longer-term, there were concerns about the ability of community organisations in Inverclyde to meet the expected growing levels of demand for their services. While financial pressures on community organisations were growing even before the pandemic, the last seven months have made that pressure even more acute. There was therefore felt to be a need for long-term funding for community-based organisations to enable them to meet the growing needs of the people that they work with. In the words of one interviewee:

*“there is a role for the local authority as well, to make sure that there are resources coming down to the sector, and funders as well, actually, to make sure that in particular places like Inverclyde where the need is great, to make sure that resources get there. That is really important.”*

It was noted that CVS Inverclyde delivers an existing programme that offers support to community-based organisations in accessing funding and provides online training in developing funding applications. This kind of support was deemed to be essential post pandemic in order to consolidate the work carried out during the pandemic.

Finally, a strong feature of the community response in Inverclyde was said to be the mass mobilisation of volunteers, who played a critical role in meeting people's needs and supporting the work of community organisations. This was viewed as one area that would benefit from additional systems being put in place to ensure best practice in working with volunteers, including ensuring the provision of relevant training opportunities for volunteers and progression routes to paid employment if appropriate.

## Other issues

### *Free school meals*

The initial distribution of free school meals in Inverclyde was said by one interview to be challenging, with the provision of packed lunch hubs and deliveries of fortnightly food bags in the early phases of the crisis not necessarily meeting the needs of all children. The council's subsequent decision to transition to cash-based support – in the form of a fortnightly £25 grant – was strongly welcomed.

### *Engagement with Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities*

While the proportion of BME people in Inverclyde was said to be low in comparison to other parts of Scotland, it was nevertheless raised in a number of interviews that there was low levels of engagement between services and BME communities in the area.

### *Support for fathers*

One interviewee noted a lack of support locally for fathers, and in particular for fathers on low incomes. It was felt that classes and groups for fathers who are struggling would be beneficial not just for them in terms of peer support, but also for their children.

## For more information, please contact:

Neil Cowan, Senior Policy and Parliamentary Officer, Poverty Alliance  
[neil.cowan@povertyalliance.org](mailto:neil.cowan@povertyalliance.org)