

WEATHERING THE STORM:

GET HEARD SCOTLAND 2020/2021 SUMMARY REPORT



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The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

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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.



INTRODUCTION

The last year has been one like no other. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the rising tide of poverty that was already sweeping many people across Scotland into hardship and has particularly hit those groups already most likely to experience poverty in Scotland; lone parents who are women, disabled people, BAME communities, carers, and young people in low-paid and insecure employment.

At the time of publication, the pandemic appears to be easing thanks to a successful vaccine roll-out and an extended lockdown. As we finally move into what we all hope will be a phase of economic and social recovery, it is critical to reflect on where our recovery will lead us. Will it be back to the economy and society that we had before? One where over one million people in Scotland were locked into poverty and where the injustice of poverty was impacting the lives of almost one in four children?

It is clear that we must be moving toward a new and more just place. A Scotland where the wrong of poverty is righted, where the value of compassion is reflected in all of our social and economic policies, and where every child really does have every chance.

As we emerge from the pandemic, it is vital that we make good on the rhetoric that was heard throughout 2020 of the need to 'build back better'. If we are to do this, then we must ensure that people most affected by the pandemic, people who are living on low incomes, are shaping the direction of policy change. This is not just about 'listening' to the voices of communities impacted by poverty; it is about acting on those voices and making sure that those voices are at the center of policy-making processes.

That is what *Get Heard Scotland* intends to do. By engaging with people in Scotland experiencing poverty – as well as the organisations that work with them – the initiative aims to ensure that efforts to meet Scotland's child poverty reduction targets are shaped by those who know best; people living in our communities who are experiencing poverty. This report sets out a snapshot of what people in Inverclyde and Renfrewshire – the two areas in which *Get Heard Scotland* has focused its work in 2020/2021 – have told us about not just the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their lives, but also their proposals for change. The findings are not only relevant for policy makers in these two areas as they develop their plans for addressing poverty as part of the Local Child Poverty Action Plan, but also hold important lessons for local authorities and health boards across Scotland, as well as for Scottish Government.

Background and process

Get Heard Scotland gathers evidence on the experience of poverty, from people who are living on low incomes, as well as from organisations and groups working on the ground to help address poverty. It has been operating since 2018, and periodically reporting on key issues raised by the people that we have spoken to over the years. Like so many other organisations, the Poverty Alliance had to change the way we worked over the last year. Instead of running workshops that would involve people on low incomes and the organisations they worked with, we organised one-to-one discussions with people living on low incomes. In total, 39 interviews were carried out with individuals in Renfrewshire and Inverclyde.



Whilst the number of people living on low incomes that we spoke to in 2020-21 was lower than the previous year, as a result of organising individual interviews instead of group discussions, we have arguably gathered evidence that has more depth. The full research report from the individual interviews will be published separately. Taking part in the interviews were 24 women and 15 men; 31 participants identified as white Scottish/British/Irish, four as white European, one person as South Asian, one as white American and two as Black African. All but four of the interviewees had children.

In addition, 28 interviews were carried out with community and third sector organisations in Inverclyde and Renfrewshire (see Appendix 1), as well as 6 interviews in other local authority areas. Summaries of these interviews were published earlier in the project and were fed back to the two local authorities during the course of the project. An event was also held in February to discuss the emerging findings and to identify key steps that could be taken to address poverty locally. These findings have been added to the conclusions of this report. We are very grateful to the organisations

that have taken part in this work over the last year, in the most difficult circumstances. These organisations not only gave their time repeatedly to the project, but also helped to identify people with direct experience of poverty who could participate in the project. Groups and organisations like those involved in this project not only provide vital services to people living on low incomes, but play a vital role in connecting communities, and in representing those communities to policy makers.

In developing *Get Heard Scotland* in 2020-21 it was not only the shift to remote working and one to one interviews that represented a significant change in our approach. Given the crisis conditions that much of the work was taking place in, particularly during the winter lockdown, and the emergence of some clear impacts of the pandemic it was felt appropriate to take a more focused approach to the engagement with organisations and individuals. Instead of the open questions that have been used in *Get Heard Scotland* workshops, we decided to focus on a number of key issues: employment and unemployment, digital exclusion, mental health, and community

infrastructure. These themes were based on initial engagement with organisations as well as the advice of the *Get Heard* advisory group. It is these themes that are reported on below.

The interviews with organisations took place from August 2020 until January 2021, with the majority conducted between September-November 2020. The interviews with individuals took place between November 2020 and March 2021. Participants received a £15 voucher as a thanks for taking part in the interview.

In addition to the individual interviews, a group of six people with experience of poverty were also involved in the 'co-analysis' of the themes and issues that emerged from the report. This allowed additional input into the process of developing findings and recommendations from the report.

Throughout the different phases of the *Get Heard Scotland* activity in 2021-21 in, staff at the Poverty Alliance maintained regular contact with officials at both Renfrewshire and Inverclyde local authorities. This included individual meetings, inputs into Inverclyde's Child Poverty Action Group and a seminar in February 2021 with council officials and third sector organisations to discuss emerging findings. Alongside these discussions, we have also been working with Northern Star Associates as part of the *Get Heard Scotland* programme to carry out focused work to scope out the development of local participatory policy process in both local authority areas. In both local authorities, there has been a genuine desire to find more effective ways of meaningfully involving people with experience of poverty in shaping local anti-poverty policy. We hope that the work as part of Get Heard Scotland will have contributed towards making participatory policy making the norm in the future.



CONTEXT: POVERTY & COVID-19

“I mean, a lot o’ people are having to turn their heating off, they’re having to turn their lights off because they can’t afford to run it. And that’s just no’ right.”

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, over one million people in Scotland – including around a quarter of all children – were living in poverty.¹ The figures for some groups are significantly higher than others, with around 40% of children in lone parent families or in Black and minority ethnic families growing up in the grip of poverty. Since March 2020, that grip has tightened on the lives of many, while many more have been swept into poverty for the first time.

Groups disproportionately impacted, particularly through the pandemic’s effect on the labour market, include low-paid women, disabled people, young people, and people from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. With fears persisting that that short-term impact will entrench inequalities in the longer-term, the knock-on impact on levels of child poverty in Scotland could, without action being taken, be significant.

Of pressing concern are the 2023 interim child poverty reduction targets set by the 2017 Child Poverty (Scotland) Act which, analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows, are likely to be missed unless significant action is taken.² With the new iteration of the Scottish Government’s Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan due in 2022, it is more important than ever that the voices of people living on low incomes in communities across Scotland are heard and acted on.

This report is intended to contribute to that work; highlighting not only the impact of poverty on people’s lives, but also the way in which the pandemic has exacerbated the challenges experienced by people and communities, as well as outlining key solutions for change.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/collections/poverty-and-income-inequality-statistics/>

² <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/turning-tide-child-poverty-scotland>

KEY FINDINGS

Mental health

“Really difficult. Especially trying to cope, trying to get by day to day wi’ the way my head is some mornings when I wake up.”

“But there needs to be a lot mair stuff for people struggling. Especially wi’ this pandemic. After the pandemic it’s still gonna be hard for everybody, no matter what they say.”

The links between poverty and poor mental health are significant, with people living in Scotland’s most socio-economically deprived areas being approximately twice as likely to experience mental health problems as those in the least deprived areas.³ Similarly, in 2018 26% of adults living in the most deprived areas scored a GHQ-12 score of four or more (indicative of a possible psychiatric disorder). This compares to 14% of adults in the least deprived areas.⁴

Since the onset of the pandemic, though, it has been clear that the mental health impact – while being experienced by people across the socio-economic spectrum – was being borne disproportionately by people living on low incomes. The Scottish Government, for example, noted in its *The Impacts of Covid-19 on Equalities in Scotland* paper that adults in the UK who have, or who expect to, experience negative financial impacts from the pandemic were also experiencing higher levels of anxiety, lower happiness, and other negative mental health effects.⁵

Our engagement throughout the year, both with community-based organisations and directly with people living on low incomes, has underlined just how profound this effect has been. Most of the organisations that we spoke with had witnessed a steep rise in the numbers of people they support experiencing mental health issues, with some reporting a rise in suicidal ideation among the people they work with and support, with one reporting some evidence of a rise in alcohol and substance misuse. Key drivers of this were said to be:

- 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

³ Millard AD, McCartney G. Scottish Mental Health Profiles for Adults: Summary Report. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland; 2015

⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2020/09/the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-equality-in-scotland/documents/full-report/full-report/govscot%3Adocument/Covid%2Band%2Binequalities%2BFinal%2BReport%2BFor%2BPublication%2B-%2BPDF.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHF-covid-19-inequality-mental-healthbriefing.pdf> ; <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/welbeing/bulletins/personalandeconomicwellbeinginthekuk/may2020>

A number of organisations and individuals also made clear that, even before the pandemic, mental health provision in their community could be extremely difficult to access, with long waiting times and with people on low incomes unable to afford access to private mental health services:

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

Community organisation, Renfrewshire

“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.”

Community organisation, Inverclyde

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 pandemic, 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. One carers organisation, 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.

In several interviews, it was clear that community-based organisations played a critical role in supporting people with mental health issues through the pandemic. Peer support was particularly welcome, with one interviewee saying:

“I believe peer to peer is, you cannae get anything better than that peer to peer support... I think that’s your kinda, kinda peer workers, you know what I mean? People that’s been there kinda moving, you know what I mean? I believe that’s got a big impact.”

“Like real... people like me, that have got that hands on experience that can change the stigma and that. I would love to see that, after the pandemic. I would love to see that after the pandemic, because we’re not getting that.”

This experience highlighted not only the impact of the pandemic on mental wellbeing, but the types of issues and responses that were needed. The interconnected issues of stigma, poverty and mental health are ones that require further investigation and are ones that we can be sure will have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Responses to mental health issues after the pandemic must take into account the overlapping issues of poverty and stigma.

Support was also expressed in the interviews for a more integrated approach to mental health that embedded mental health provision within wider services, for example in housing services, welfare rights advice services and in education settings. It was felt that doing so would be particularly helpful for parents who may neglect their own mental health needs in order to put the needs of their children first, as would ensuring that local services work more in tandem in order to provide more holistic support to people:



“I just actually sent an email there, it’s about time all the services started connecting. So clients know about what is, so services know what each other is dae’in and making their clinics available. So they can, ‘cause after, they’re gonnae be inundated once this pandemic’s over.”

Good examples of this kind of approach were highlighted, with one interviewee talking about the impact that their employability service – operating in partnership with a counselling service – had on them:

“Yes, so I was getting... employability support from them and they offered me counselling. I really, really, really appreciated that opportunity because in about six to seven sessions, I was able to resolve any issues I had.”

“But if they know someone’s got mental health issues, or they think someone could have mental health issues, or even just a text to everybody that’s on Job Centre just to kinda address like this, if you are struggling there’s numbers you can phone.”

Employment

“People are working forty hours a week, and fifty hours a week and they’re still going tae a food bank.”

“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.”

With 68% of children in Scotland in poverty living in working households⁶, it was already clear pre-pandemic that Scotland’s labour market, with its high levels of low-paid and insecure work, was trapping too many people into poverty. While steps have been taken to address this in recent years, such as support for initiatives such as Living Wage Scotland and the Scottish Government’s commitment to becoming a ‘Living Wage Nation’⁷, in-work poverty is still a reality for too many people, particularly women, young people, and people from BAME backgrounds, across Scotland.

⁶ https://data.gov.scot/poverty/#Child_poverty

⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/news/living-wage-nation/>

Inverclyde and Renfrewshire are both areas that have historically had significant labour market challenges and that have struggled in recent years to support high-quality, secure work for everyone. Inverclyde, in particular, has unemployment rates higher than the national average.⁸

Given existing labour market issues in the areas, across all discussions it was evident that there were deep concerns about the short, medium and long-term impact of the pandemic on the employment prospects of people living in Inverclyde and Renfrewshire. In the short-term, reductions in income experienced by many people in work as a result of unemployment or furlough had been significant, with a disproportionate impact being experienced felt by women (particularly women with children, and particularly women who were lone parents), people from BAME backgrounds, and young people.

It was clear that the pandemic exposed the many existing inadequacies in the way our labour market operates, for example the prevalence of insecure employment for young people. Several organisations said that, particularly at the start of the pandemic, they were supporting increasing numbers of people who were previously unknown to their services, especially people employed in the gig economy and younger 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.”

Community organisation, Renfrewshire

Of particular concern to many was the risk that groups that can already experience exclusion from the labour market – women who are lone parents, BAME people, people with mental health issues, people with experience of imprisonment, and people with substance misuse issues – would be further excluded given the larger numbers of people now looking for work and the increased competition for jobs:

“I think for two of the guys anyway [that I know] 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?”

Community organisation, Inverclyde

There was therefore felt to be a need for additional and targeted employability support for these groups to help them enter or re-enter the labour market. Initiatives launched by the UK Government and Scottish Government, such as the UK Government’s Kickstart scheme and the Scottish Government’s Young Person’s Guarantee were not raised by participants which potentially reflects of a lack of awareness of these programmes.

On the particular barriers to employment, childcare was understood to be critical. A lack of affordable and flexible childcare was one of the key barriers to employment identified by interviewees, and one that prevents women – particularly women who are lone parents, in particular – from accessing, sustaining or progressing in employment. While the Scottish Government’s planned expansion of free childcare provision to 1140 hours will make an impact, it is clear that a further expansion will be required if all parents, but particularly women, are to be supported in returning to or sustaining employment.

⁸ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157422/report.aspx#tabempunemp>

Community and third sector support

The role of community-based third sector organisations in supporting people on low incomes through the worst of the economic storm was one of the most prevalent and recurring features through all interviews. It was clear that, from the very start of the pandemic, these organisations were working on the frontline to ensure that needs were met and that people were not falling through the gaps in our social safety net.

Many interviewees spoke about the support – whether financial, practical, or emotional – that they had received from local organisations in Inverclyde and Renfrewshire, and about the impact that had on them:

“They’ve dropped down food parcels and that, and it’s even just to have that someone knock on the door, stand in the front garden, and you can talk to them from the fences, just to be able to see somebody else different. They’ve just been – they’ve just been an emotional support.”

“But having that emotional support online on the phone from Home-Start was an absolute godsend, it kept me sane. But as well, the friends that I’ve made through Home-Start, so the other parents who are supported, we’ve all kept in touch and made sure everyone’s alright.”

Critically, though, interviewees also discussed the fact that – while they had been able to access services – they had only found out about those services through chance or word-of-mouth. There were concerns that others who may need support from local organisations, particularly mental health support, may not know where or how to access that support:

“There is a lot o’ services out there, obviously, but you have to know where to look. My doctor, I was younger when I got referred to like RAMH and stuff like that, so I’ve known about them since I was young. So that’s always been a part of my life, even with my mum. But for other people it’s harder to find anything like that.”

“And even ma mam says to me – “See before you had all this help through Man On and everything else, you were ready for killing yourself.” And I was. I’m no’ gonna lie. I’ve had attempts on ma ain life because o’ the way I was living and stuff. But knowing that I’ve got all that support there, personally, without finding it maself, people telling me, word-of-mouth, I wouldnae have been able to find it.”

There was felt, therefore, to be a need to build on the increased partnership working that had taken place since the pandemic, to ensure that services were better connected and that everyone who required support was aware of and able to access it.

Impact on community and third sector organisations

The pandemic had a huge impact on the design and delivery of services among community and third sector organisations. In the initial phase of the pandemic, all organisations interviewed reconfigured their services in to meet the increased and evolving needs of the people they work with.

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. While this required significant work on the part of the organisations, they were able to do this at speed due to their deep understanding of the communities in which they worked and of the needs of the people they work with.

From the perspective of community-based and other third sector organisations, there was a sense from all discussions that organisations had fostered much stronger partnership working – both across the third sector and with local authorities and statutory services – in response to the challenges posed by the pandemic:

“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.”

Community organisation, Renfrewshire

“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.”

Community organisation, Renfrewshire

Despite this strong partnership working, there were concerns expressed by many that despite the additional funding available to the sector from the start of the pandemic, ongoing financial pressures and significantly higher demand for services would place organisations under considerable strain. While a lack of long-term financial resources was a critical issue for the sector pre-pandemic, with smaller community-based organisations often unable to build on successful projects or offer job security for staff, the additional demand for services was placing even greater strain on services and projects.

Although many organisations engaged with had received support from new funding sources like the Scottish Government’s Wellbeing Fund, there were concerns expressed about the long-term financial context. There was a widespread 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.”

Community organisation, Renfrewshire

Among people accessing local community and third sector services, there was also an awareness about the financial pressures that those services were facing, with concern about the impact on the delivery of services and a belief that investment in those services needed to be protected and enhanced:

“Possibly grants, more grants, I think. And basically just listening to the community like because I just feel as if the councillors in the town just don’t, they don’t listen to you.... it’s no’ fair because people rely on these places to go and unwind and have that cup of tea, have that, somebody to listen and no’ judge you and... And if that’s got taken away from you, where do you go to ask for help?”

“I think it’s lack of funding for the charity and because there’s a lack of funding, they can’t get any more people in to work, to get the waiting list down.”

Food insecurity

Prior to the pandemic, Scotland was already a country with high levels of food insecurity. In 2019/20, 16% of people in Scotland lived in households with marginal, low, or very low food security.⁹ As highlighted by the A Menu For Change project, significant numbers of people facing food insecurity resort to using food banks in order to meet their needs; an experience that can be deeply stigmatising.¹⁰ This was a feeling that was reflected by one interviewee:

“It’s so detrimental to people because one week they’re working, the next minute they’re back claiming benefits, then the deal, the kinda attitude of the benefits agency, right? You’ve gotta go to a food bank and...you’re still getting something, you know what I mean? That’s the way I’ve been told to kinda look at it, you’re still getting something in your belly. But if you’ve got a family and all that, and the heating and all that, you know what I mean? It’s embarrassing. You know what I mean?”

⁹ <https://data.gov.scot/poverty/>

¹⁰ <https://menuforchange.org.uk/2019/10/02/the-system-has-been-found-wanting/>

But as the pandemic hit these levels of food insecurity sky-rocketed, with food insecurity being one of the most prominent features of the first Scotland-wide lockdown, in particular. As outlined earlier in this briefing, community and third sector organisations – often working in partnership with the local authority – were critical in meeting this challenge.

“I’m supported by a charity called Home-Start...They had another company dropping food off to them and they’d put it up on the parents group page and say, “What do you need? Here’s the photos, what do you need?” And we’d all say, “Oh, can I get this, this, and this?” But they also organised veg boxes to be delivered to all the parents who were supported.”

While cash-based responses to food insecurity were considered to be by far the most effective approach, other alternatives to food banks were also highlighted that were considered less stigmatising. For example, one interviewee spoke positively about a food club in Greenock:

“There’s not the same stigma of a food bank perhaps and it’s like a club, you pay £2.50 and you get £15 worth of food.”

Digital access

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

Community organisation, Renfrewshire

“I didnae have any internet at all. There was a point where I didnae have internet on ma phone as well. I couldnae afford it. When that happened I had to actually go into the Job Centre and then they had to book

me in tae get access tae a computer and stuff like that. And that was quite daunting, because they were like, “Well, why have you no’ got internet?” I was like “Well, I cannae afford it”, know what I mean? So that was quite daunting at one point in my life, when I couldnae afford it.”

Digital access, already critical in supporting people to participate fully in society and to access a range of services, has become ever-more vital through the pandemic and during the several phases of lockdown. While for many this meant they could continue to access the services and support they needed – in many cases in a more straight-forward way – for others it meant being locked out of that support, due to being digitally excluded either through a lack of cash to buy or run digital devices, or through a lack of digital skills.

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 and young people during periods 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.

While interviewees deemed it important to support people in accessing digital services and connections, it was also thought to be critical that services were not only delivered digitally and that services continued to be available in non-digital ways. This was important for people who did not have digital skills or access, but also for people who simply preferred to engage in non-digital means..

Social security

“I am on benefits but it’s scraping by, always worrying about money, trying to pay for everything. It’s honestly so hard! I would like the government to realise that what people on benefits get money wise isn’t enough and no wonder people on benefits have mental health problems. You just want your kids to have the best childhood.”

The extent to which the UK social security system has pulled people into poverty in recent years is well-evidenced, with policies like the benefits freeze, two child limit, and five week wait for Universal Credit combining over the last decade to lock people into hardship. The benefit cap was raised by one interviewee:

“It’s actually putting a lot o’ people in tae hardship. Even though they’re out there working, which is... to me, it’s quite unfair. That if you’re out there working and you’re doing a full time job, that you’ve got tae earn so much before you’re out that benefit cap.”

The fundamental inadequacy of UK social security was raised by a number of interviewees, with the impact of policies like the benefits freeze clear to see. While some

interviewees had received the £20 increase in Universal Credit, this was not seen as sufficient given the significant gap between the value of social security and the real-life costs that people had to meet:

“They have never raised the benefits in years. Benefit has stayed the same level for so many years, it’s ridiculous. There’s not been a cost o’ living increase, there’s not been anything. Benefits have been capped, and that cap’s gotta be blow off and give people realistic money to survive. Because at the moment they just don’t have it. There is more people in debt than ever before, especially wi’ the pandemic. It’s costing everybody so much more just to live. And the government’s just not taken that into any form of acceptance, because you’re on a legacy benefit, you’ll get nothing. You get nothing extra at all.”

“But what they’ve gotta realise is the price of everything, even from the first lockdown, like food wise, the price of everything has rose, so it has, and then, wi’ Brexit happening as well... so the prices are gonnae rise again and then wi’ benefits just staying—I know that there’s been an increase, but it’s like pennies.”

The Scottish social security system was viewed in more positive terms by those who had experience of it, with interviewees speaking favourably about the Best Start Grant, Scottish Child Payment and School Clothing Grant, while also outlining improvements that could be made to make them more adequate and able to fully meet the needs of parents:



Image © iStock

“Obviously they do the Best Start grant, which I think is a great thing. So obviously when you’re twenty four weeks you can apply for that. But I think as soon as you hit like six or seven months they should give you part of the second grant. Not saying the full of it, I’m just saying part of it or something, just to kinda help you out. Obviously once you have your first child you get £600 to help you wi’ the Best Start grant, but now when you’ve got your second child on the way, like I do the now, you only get £300, which is a big drop.”

“I understand that there’s people that have benefited from it (the Scottish Child Payment), but there’s other people that haven’t, obviously, benefited from it. And I believe that the thing about the £10 extra for the kids (Scottish Child Payment), I think if it was a higher age, then more people would’ve benefited from it. Six is quite young, that’s only like primary one, two, and nursery age.”

“Then after six month the kids grow up. They don’t use the one uniform for the full year. You have to get, like I say, some uniform after December.”

The Scottish Government’s support for carers, and in particular young carers, was also highlighted as a positive of the social security system. Again, though, the inadequacy of the support was highlighted by one interview when speaking about the Young Carers Grant:

“It is really good that Scottish Government have actually put that in place here, ‘cause it’s the only country you can get it in. But I just don’t think it’s enough.”

The Scottish Welfare Fund was raised in a number of interviewees as being an important lifeline support for people experiencing income crisis. For some people, Community Care Grants had made a positive difference on their lives:

“They did give me a community care grant, which gives you your fridge freezer, your cooker, your white



goods, stuff like that, your carpets, a single bed, a chest o' drawers. So I'm very grateful for that, 'cause if I had to move in here I would have nothing at all. 'Cause I get... my mum kicked me out, and that's why I was kinda sofa surfing between friends and stuff."

However, others who had accessed Crisis Grants via the Scottish Welfare Fund reported that the amount they had been given was not sufficient to cover their urgent needs; an issue that has been highlighted previously by the Poverty and Inequality Commission.¹¹ One interviewee said:

"I phoned Inverclyde Council for like the grant, the Crisis Grant, because there was a—the way it kinda worked it was about two and half weeks 'til I got my first wage again. And I got, it was like thirty-two pound and like thirteen pence... I really needed money. I wasn't kidding on about anything. I really needed it, and they gave me thirty-two pound."

In addition to issues around the adequacy of support, several interviews also raised the issue of people's awareness of what social security support they are entitled to, of the challenges that many continue to have in navigating the social security system, and of the fact that people with No Recourse to Public Funds are unable to access mainstream social security support.

Interviewees spoke of support that they had missed out on due to being unaware of their entitlement, and of difficulties in accessing support from the JobCentre to access those entitlements:

"I didn't know about that benefit... I didn't receive it for a long time because I didn't know about it a while. So even my wife, we just didn't do it, I don't know... So we did do it, took over—it took us a year until we made the application because it was one of our friends who told us about it."

"My hand's up, my hand's up. I cannae read. I cannae write. I suffer fae dyslexia. But aye, there is places

that can help you wi' that. Financial Fitness, the local Council. And I'm sure they've got somebody that used to be able to dae that. Don't go to the Job Centre, but. The Job Centre won't help you wi' that sorta stuff. They'll just pass you on to somebody else. But aye, there is, there is people that would help you wi' that sorta stuff, wi' forms and stuff like that. I've – I've used them services maself, wi' filling in a PIP form and other wee forms and stuff like that I've needed. There is help oot there for that sorta stuff. People don't know about it."

The importance of welfare rights advice came up repeatedly across the interviews, with many people citing examples of support they had received from advice services, as well as expressing support for increasing provision of advice in order to boost take-up and ensure that people had the support they needed:

"I got in contact with Financial Fitness and – aye, they put me – they done a benefit calculator wi' me. So I managed to get the benefit calculator and figure oot how much I was due."

"I think there needs to be some way that everybody is able to know what's available, you know, even if we don't think about what could be added on to make things better, I don't think enough people are aware of, you know, what's the situation. One of my friends here, her daughter is eighteen and had a baby and was moving out and got her first flat. But nobody told her that she could apply for a Community Care Grant or a starter pack, you know, and I thought well that's very arbitrary because one housing officer will tell you that and another housing officer

won't tell you that and I thought, really there needs to—I don't know what format this would take but there needs to be some way that everybody can immediately know what's available and what criteria you need to apply for it."

Some good examples of action to boost awareness and take-up of social security entitlements were highlighted, for example the inclusion of information on social security in health and maternity appointments:

"When I was in hospital having my children, I got lots of pamphlets and things that you can apply for Child Benefit, you can apply for Working Tax Credits, you can apply for... so I knew about it."

Debt

With more people being pulled into financial insecurity and hardship as a result of the pandemic, concerns were expressed across a number of interviews about the level of debt being accrued by households on low incomes.

Council tax arrears were a particular concern due to the way in which it can be "aggressively collected", with one representative of a third sector organisation interviewed saying:

"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."

Advice service, Renfrewshire

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.

Another interviewee described the impact of accruing rent arrears and of the hardship that this was locking them into:

“I had a letter from the people that I rent the home for saying that they wanna take me to court, because of course when the DWP stopped paying I fell into arrears, so now I owe them hundreds of pounds that I’m scraping to try and find. And you just feel you’re on this terrible treadmill, that you... you know, even though I’m earning the most I ever have, since I’ve lived in this country, I still feel like I can’t break even, you know?”

Transport

While, due to lockdown restrictions, the issue of transport was not as pressing as in pre-pandemic periods, it was still a significant issue for a number of people. At one discussion in Glasgow, it was said that the community had extremely poor transport connections to the city centre; resulting in barriers to employment and education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the challenges raised by individuals and organisations during the *Get Heard Scotland* project in 2020/21 remind us that many of the problems we associate with the pandemic, were familiar to policy makers prior to the start of the covid crisis. Problems with social security, digital access, mental health and employment did not begin with the pandemic and will not end when the pandemic is over.

It is clear that the pandemic has exacerbated these issues, and for many people has tightened the grip of poverty on their lives. As we move into a phase of economic and social recovery, it is critical that lessons are learned and that we see a step-change in how we support people on low incomes, and how we organise our economy and society to ensure that we all have enough to get by.

Perhaps one of the key lessons from our experience in during the pandemic is that where there is collective political will to take action, then resources can be found, and systems can be changed and adapted. We must apply the same sense of urgency and collective endeavor if we are to begin to turn the tide on poverty in Scotland. The actions listed below are some of the key solutions that emerge from the discussions and interviews held as part of the *Get Heard Scotland* project. All are within the powers of the Scottish Government and local authorities and all would have a significant positive impact on people's lives.

Mental health

Scottish Government:

- Investing in mental health services to ensure prompt access to specialist care for everyone, irrespective of income.

Employment

Scottish Government:

- Developing targeted employability schemes for groups most likely to be excluded from the labour market, particularly people with mental health issues, lone parents, and people from BAME backgrounds.
- Ensuring that all employability schemes also embed mental health provision to better support people with mental health issues.

Community and third sector organisations

Scottish Government:

- Providing long-term financial investment and security for community and third sector organisations.

Local authorities:

- Continuing to work closely alongside community and third sector organisations, including involvement in all key policy processes impacting them and the people with whom they work.

Food insecurity

Scottish Government:

- Developing an action plan to end the need for food banks in Scotland.
- Maintaining increased investment in Scottish Welfare Fund and undertaking a review of the Fund – covering its accessibility, guidance, administration and adequacy.

Digital access

Scottish Government:

- Committing to end digital exclusion, including by providing free, low-cost and high-quality broadband to low-income households.

Local authorities:

- Protecting services, such as libraries, that can enable digital access for people without digital access at home.
- Ensuring that all relevant local services can be accessed in non-digital means.

Social security

UK Government:

- Ending the benefit cap and two child limit.
- Ending the five-week wait for Universal Credit by making advance payments non-repayable.
- Maintaining the £20 uplift in Universal Credit and extending the increase to legacy benefits.

Scottish Government:

- Committing to a Scottish Minimum Income Guarantee.
- Doubling the Scottish Child Payment by the end of 2021 and bringing forward roll-out to children over the age of 6.
- Increasing the value of other financial support for low-income families, including the Best Start Grant and School Clothing Grant.
- Increasing the value of financial support for carers, including the Carer's Allowance Supplement and the Young Carers Grant.
- Investing in welfare rights provision to ensure people are able to access their entitlements.

Local authorities:

- Supporting the provision of welfare rights and income maximisation services, especially in locations such as schools and health services.

Debt

Scottish Government:

- Working with local authorities, lenders and landlords to develop write-off schemes that will provide greater financial security to people on low incomes.

APPENDIX 1: ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN PHASE 1 INTERVIEWS

Inverclyde:

- Belvile 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
- Port Glasgow Spiritual Mission
- Gamtalk
- Financial Fitness Inverclyde
- Salvation Army

Renfrewshire

- Kairos Women's Group
- Renfrewshire Young Carers
- Barnardos Threads
- The One Initiative

- Recovery Across Mental Health (RAMH)
- Pachedu
- Linstone Housing
- Ferguslie Housing Association
- Renfrewshire Citizens Advice Bureau
- Renfrewshire Adult Carers
- The Star Project
- The Wise Group (Fair Start Scotland)
- Tannahill Centre
- Families Outside
- Home Start Renfrewshire

Other organisations

- Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA)
- Castlemilk Furniture Projects
- The Ripple
- Cranhill Development Trust
- Fife Gingerbread
- Cornerstone House



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