

Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 Post Legislative Scrutiny

JOINT SCOTTISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL WORK SCOTLAND RESPONSE TO SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SOCIAL SECURITY COMMITTEE

September 2024

The Scottish Association of Social Workers (SASW) and Social Work Scotland (SWS) represent the voice of social work across Scotland at both practice and senior managerial level. Poverty affects a significant number of the people our members support across each of the main fields of justice, adults, and children and families. It is this all-pervasive influence sometimes called *the wallpaper of social work*¹ which leads our organisations to respond jointly to this post legislative scrutiny consultation, taking the opportunity to comment on the specific questions but also contextualise child poverty in the wider societal, legislative and financial content, which require to be addressed if the aim of reducing child poverty is to be achieved and Government targets achieved.

Our members and social workers more widely are committed to meeting the needs of our citizens and particularly those who experience the greatest challenges and barriers to their wellbeing and lives. Our profession is based on the principles of human rights, reflecting the value of all individuals and upholding their rights This is expressed in the SSSC Codes of Practice² and in the BASW code of ethics³. These underline the inherent worth and dignity of all people, demonstrated in practice through relationships, and promotion of self-determination, participation and wellbeing.

¹ [Stripping the Wallpaper of Practice: Empowering Social Workers to Tackle Poverty \(qub.ac.uk\)](http://qub.ac.uk)

² [SSSC Codes of Practice - Scottish Social Services Council](#)

³ [Code of Ethics | BASW](#)).

Advocating for the wellbeing and rights of citizens at both practice and policy level, is part of the context within which social workers operate on a daily basis, balancing complex issues of competing rights and a challenging environment in which poverty and its impact is a significant aspect.

Policy Connection: Individuals and particularly children do not exist in isolation. Policies and decisions in seemingly unrelated areas can have a profound impact on the level of poverty experienced in families. Enabling a more joined up and comprehensive approach to policy and funding priorities has the power to transform the lives of children in a way that the current disconnected landscape and focus is unable to achieve.

Child poverty in Scotland has profound implications for social work. Where there is poverty, it affects every aspect of children's lives and the services provided to them.

We recognise that this call for evidence is an important part of a parliamentary process to ensure scrutiny and transparency in our legislative landscape, and the focus on child poverty is welcome. However, legislation does not appear to be effectively addressing poverty. The questions asked in the consultation do not provide sufficient opportunity for a critique of the legislation and policy, which, in our view, limits the effectiveness of contributions to the solution to eradicating child poverty. We have therefore included and outlined our shared perspective on the pervasiveness of poverty, its multi-dimensional cause and impact, and the need to end siloed approaches to what is a societal issue.

The work needed to change this should be understood in the context of the wider causal factors which result in or impact on, child poverty

As organisations working daily with individuals impacted by poverty, we see the struggles that result and how family poverty contributes to an increased reliance on unpaid care, increases health inequalities, and reduces economic capacity and educational attainment. Poverty is also a factor in many public protection scenarios, substance use, crime and other societal and general wellbeing areas.

Planning, Investment and Monitoring: Social work leaders and others responsible for mitigating the worst effects of poverty on communities are inundated with action plans, reporting, and targets. While planning and monitoring is critical, these plans are often

overlapping and complex, creating a confusing set of priorities and utilising vital resources which would otherwise be available for front line services. Attempts to reduce child poverty in this way has become a block rather than a facilitating factor.

To make a substantial impact on child poverty, as a society we need to invest to ensure services at all levels are resourced within communities, individuals and families across Scotland. Economic growth will aim this but it also means a strong safety net of social security and social work support coupled with a long-term focus to ensure that prosperity of Scotland benefits all.

This level of shift cannot be achieved by reporting, planning and willing services to do better with dwindling resources. It will take brave and extensive investment in front line teams and projects. Recent work around the social work workforce shows that well-resourced social work teams can play vital role in supporting communities to overcome the generational trauma, stigma and shame poverty can impose.

The Cost of Poverty: Poverty also carries with it a cost. It causes harm to the opportunities and wellbeing of Scotland's current and future population and increases demand on public services. We hope that this response facilitates a constructive discussion on how we can do better as a society, tying policy areas together, considering funding in a non-compartmentalised and long-term manner, and tackling some of the source issues impacting not only on our children but our society as a whole. We provide information on research and policy as additional context to our views.

The reflections within this response are drawn from across our organisations and areas highlighted in a range of other consultation response over recent years. Our memberships cover social workers and social work leaders in both local authorities and third sector involved in delivery of services to children and adults, and justice.

Consultation Questions:

- 1. The Act introduced a statutory framework for reducing child poverty. What difference has that framework made to the way the Scottish Government has approached reducing child poverty?**

Given that child poverty has not reduced in the way expected, questions remain about a statutory approach to poverty being effective,

Child poverty targets, delivery plans and reporting requirements are underpinned by the legislative framework in the Act.

2. What difference has the statutory framework made to the way local authorities and health boards have approached reducing child poverty?

It has created another layer of planning and reporting. Local authorities already have statutory duties in relation to the wellbeing of children and other vulnerable groups, many of which bring with them reporting duties e.g. corporate parenting plans, children's rights plans, reporting in relation to delayed discharge, mental health and wellbeing and educational attainment. The inclusion of reporting on poverty adds to the complexity, overlap and confusion outlined in our introduction to this response, creating a more complex landscape for leaders and removing vital resource away from front line efforts to tackle poverty.

3. What difference has having the targets, delivery plans and reporting requirements built into the Act made at a national level?

Scotland has not reached the child poverty targets, nor has it made any significant dent in the percentage of children living in poverty since the legislation was introduced. This suggests that a review of the targets and approach would be indicated.

4. The Act set up several scrutiny measures. How effective have these been?

See response to Q2 above

5. If you were involved in scrutiny of the Bill in 2016/17, has it had the impact you expected?

SASW and SWS support social workers and the social work leadership across Scotland. SWS responded to the consultation in 2016/17, noting the goal but also the risks of the proposals and the importance of long-term attention to the areas including resources which are required in order to make the intended difference. As is seen in our response to the current consultation the lack of such investment is one reason for the impact desired not being achieved.

6. What does the implementation of the Act tell us about the effectiveness or otherwise of statutory targets as a way of driving policy?

Legislation, planning and reporting targets deflect resource from the arenas in which it is required. The duties and the local and national desire to reduce and eradicate child poverty is there. Our members note that it is coordinated and direct resources rather than targets which make the difference. Suggestions for what would make a difference are:

- A nationally coordinated approach and plan to address poverty across Scottish Government departments.
- A shift in funding for poverty initiatives from small, short term, pots of money to a sustainable and ongoing national effort delivered nationally and locally i.e. through fiscal and social security routes along with resource at local level to spend directly where families need it.
- A reduction in reporting demands linked to funding.
- A recognition that poverty is unlikely to be fixed in a short time frame but that each year must bring down the numbers of adults and children living in poverty.

7. Do you have any other comments?

Conclusions: SASW and SWS have used the opportunity of responding to this consultation to highlight some of the evidence supporting what our front line and senior managers in social work are telling us about the increase in, and impact of, poverty on children but also wider society now and in the future. We align with the government's wish to tackle child poverty for the sake of our children but also our society. We seek to open a conversation about what works, and how best, together and across disciplines and organisations, to tackle the issue. The lack of coordination and alignment between polices, a siloed and short-term approach to funding streams and the increasing focus on monetary approaches to income are not achieving the desired – and shared – outcome to reduce poverty and increase the life changes of our children. Tackling the underlying contributors to poverty in families and communities, utilising local community facilities and relationship and working at policy level in a coordinated manner could make a real difference.

SWS and SASW would welcome the opportunity to speak further about the matters, and look forward to working together to improve the outcomes for our children and their families and our future society by addressing the underlying causes of poverty,

To assist the Committee in its thinking we have drawn together research and policy documents into an **appendix** below.

Research and Policy Documents:

Key Impacts:

Poverty impacts across the spectrum of social work services and child poverty is a reflection of pressures and poverty amongst adults and communities who bear the responsibility for caring for children. Child poverty therefore needs to be viewed in that wider context of poverty across the life span. A child who is experiencing poverty will inevitably be cared for by adults who are experiencing poverty, often within communities which are experiencing poverty – tackling one part of the problem may not be as effective as addressing wider issues of need across communities,

We highlight here some of the evidence which demonstrates how child poverty significantly shapes the landscape of social work in Scotland, requiring a multifaceted approach to support affected children and families effectively.

- **Increased Demand for Services:** Social workers often see higher caseloads in areas with significant child poverty. Families struggling with poverty are more likely to face issues such as housing instability, food insecurity, and mental health challenges, necessitating more intensive support.
- **Health and Well-being:** Children living in poverty are at greater risk of poor health outcomes, including malnutrition, chronic illnesses, and mental health issues. Social workers play a crucial role in connecting these families with healthcare services and advocating for their needs.
- **Educational Barriers:** Poverty can hinder a child's educational attainment due to factors like lack of access to learning resources, poor living conditions, and stress. Social workers often collaborate with schools to provide additional support, such as tutoring, counselling, and ensuring children have the necessary supplies.
- **Family Stress and Dynamics:** Financial strain can lead to increased stress and conflict within families, sometimes resulting in neglect or abuse. Social workers provide critical interventions to support family relationships, offer parenting advice, and, when necessary, arrange for alternative care.

- **Policy and Advocacy:** Social workers in Scotland are also involved in advocating for policies that address the root causes of child poverty. This includes pushing for better social safety nets, affordable housing, and access to quality education and healthcare.

The **National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021, updated 2023** outlines the issues and challenges in relation to poverty and its impact on child protection.

The guidance defines neglect as: *'...the persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. There can also be single instances of neglectful behaviour that cause significant harm. Neglect can arise in the context of systemic stresses such as poverty and is an indicator of both support and protection needs*

'Most families experiencing poverty provide safe and loving homes and practitioners should be careful not to stigmatise families through highlighting the impact of poverty in families. However, poverty can cause as well as accelerate neglect and the risk of other harms. Consideration of the impact of poverty on children is a core consideration in child protection assessment and family support. Recent research indicates the disproportionate number of children placed apart from their families within the poorest neighbourhoods in Scotland.'

'Poverty intersects with other stressors upon families, including disability, mental health problems, ill health, poor housing, barriers to employment, poor literacy skills, learning disabilities.'

Local authorities have a duty to safeguard families who have no recourse to public funds. The needs of children in such situations and the pressures on their families remain as significant as those of any other child, and arguably more so due to the poverty that results from being unable to work/earn or access benefits.

To further underline the importance of a coordinated approach to child poverty, relevant aspects from what are traditionally viewed as 'adult' areas are noted:

- A snapshot across adult social work services in Scotland reveals a system struggling to address growing need. Our substance use services are contending with increased

drug deaths, up by 12% from 2022.⁴ mental health services are experiencing higher demands on Mental Health Officers (MHO's) with reported shortfalls across Scotland standing at just under 3,000 hours per week⁵ (estimations of numbers for those people in Scotland providing unpaid care are around 800,000;⁶ and with figures suggesting that conditions like dementia are continuing to increase in prevalence across the country, these statistics are set to grow.⁷

- Across the board, adult services continue to feel pressures around resources, staff retention, geographical differences, and real cuts to finances. As services become entrenched in a position of being reactive to crises, the proactive nature of the profession to provide early intervention is diminished.
- In our justice services, where an adult in a household with children is sentenced to a period in custody and they are the sole breadwinner or one of the employed adults in the household, this adversely affects the income of the family and may lead to eviction or other negative consequences.
- Where an adult in a household is sentenced to a monetary penalty then payment may put the whole household into hardship and impact particularly on children
- Adults in the criminal justice system who have addiction issues and family responsibilities may put the family at risk of hardship and may lead to criminal convictions, if they are involved in offending behaviour in order to feed their usage.

The Promise (<https://thepromise.scot/>), a core cross-party Scottish Government commitment and our blueprint for change and improvement in children's services, states that '*Poverty is a mediating factor among various factors that increase the risk of child abuse and neglect*'. It recognises the importance of scaffolding – the framework needed to ensure that the right actions are enabled to happen - and states that this involves '*shifting resources towards prevention and early intervention*'. BASW and Social Work Scotland endorse the need for this this shift.

⁴ (<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/drug-related-deaths/23/drug-related-deaths-23-report.pdf>);

⁵ (<https://news.sssc.uk.com/news/2023-mental-health-officers-report>);

⁶ (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-carers-update-release-march-2024/>),

⁷ (<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/news/2023/deaths-from-dementias-increase>).

Urie Bronfenbrenner (2013)⁸ believed that we cannot view an issue in isolation, and every child (and adult) is nested within an ecological system wherein their immediate support system is impacted by the neighbourhood we live in, the work we engage in, and the supports available to us within the community. In turn, this is impacted by cultural beliefs and attitudes, messages from media, but also by legislation and policy which should enable every individual to thrive and hold those who inhibit this to account. Scaffolding needs to consider provision across the whole ecological system and recognise that without supporting those who care for children, there is no foundation to build on.

In short, if we continue to view child poverty as a single issue to be addressed, whilst at the same time eroding resources across adult services, cutting finances, closing vital community services, and focusing only on those with the highest needs, then there will be no scaffold for our youngest members of society.

Cost of Poverty:

While no costs can be placed on the value of the safety and wellbeing of a child, from a practice perspective, social workers see the costs of poverty daily. Examples are:

- The financial costs of care provision for children with standard residential placement now costing £7,000 week and an increasing number of specialist placement exceeding £10,000 week,
- The increase in thresholds for provision of local authority care to those who require home support, resulting in additional demands on unpaid carers.
- Greater likelihood that children impacted by poverty will require additional support and services
- The housing crisis which impacts on all ages but has a particular impact on family stress/mental health. Evidence from research has also highlighted the pressure housing issues can have in terms of and related pressure on children
- Increased demand for mental health provision and the crisis being experienced around children's mental health
- The costs of custody arrangements
- Loss of revenue and economic impact on the individual and state.

⁸ Bronfenbrenner, U., 2013. Ecology of the family as a context for human development: Research perspectives. *Adolescents and their families*, pp.1-20.

The key impacts noted above all have attached a financial and individual cost. The financial cost is relevant for national and local government, third sector and communities. The psychological and emotional costs are born by children and their families both now and in the future – the impact of poverty is not only an immediate, but a long-lasting impact - and the economic costs by individuals and by society as a whole.

Those costs are seen in a range of policy priorities and expectations explored in more detail below.

Policy:

The Scottish Government has implemented a range of policies aimed at reducing child poverty by addressing immediate financial need.

- Scottish Child Payment introduced in February 2021 provides financial assistance to low-income families with children under the age of 16 years. Initially set at £10 week per child it is now provided at £25 week per child. [This policy alone is estimated to reduce the relative child poverty rate by 5 percentage points, lifting around 50,000 children out of poverty.](#)
- Best start grant and best start food. These programmes offer financial assistance to low income families during key stages of a child's early years such as pregnancy, and transition to school. [They help ensure children have access to nutritious food and essential items.](#)
- Free school meals and school clothing grants. [By providing free school meals and grants for school clothing, the government helps alleviate some of the financial burdens on low-income families, ensuring children have access to nutritious meals and appropriate clothing for school.](#)
- Housing and welfare reforms. Policies such as the Scottish welfare Fund and Discretionary Housing payments help to mitigate the impact of welfare cuts and housing costs [These measures support families in maintaining stable housing and meeting basic needs.](#)
- Cumulative impact. According to a recent report, Scottish Government policies aim to keep 100,000 children out of relative poverty and 70,000 out of absolute poverty by 2024-25. [These policies are expected to reduce child poverty rates by 10 percentage points for relative poverty and 7 percentage points for absolute poverty.](#)

Additionally, as part of the support to meet the Promise, the **Whole Family Wellbeing Fund (WFWF)**⁹ initiative seeks to transform family support services to reduce the need for crisis interventions and promote early, preventative measures.

It aims to provide:

- Holistic family support
- Preventative and early intervention
- Support transformational systemic change
- Reduce inequalities:
- Enhance life chances

These initiatives sit within the wider and overarching policy landscape of Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) and the developing GIRFE framework. **GIRFEC** continues to develop across Scotland supporting families to receive the right help, at the right time and from the right people. GIRFEC places children and young people's wellbeing at the centre of all assessment and planning. It recognises that children and young people will have different experiences in their lives and have the right to expect appropriate support from adults to allow them to grow and develop and reach their full potential. The GIRFEC approach encourages consideration of the child's experience and perspective, within and beyond the family, thus all assessments of wellbeing should consider poverty as a key factor in the lives of children and their families.

This has been further underlined with UNCRC Incorporation (Scotland) Act 2024. Article 27.3 of the **UNCRC** requires public authorities to assist parents and others responsible for the child as necessary in providing the conditions necessary for the child's development.

Evidence in research - **Bywaters P., Bunting, L., Davidson, G., Hanratty, J., Mason, W., McCarton, C. and Steils, N. (2016) *The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: An evidence review*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.**¹⁰

⁹ [The WFWF aims to reduce inequalities in family wellbeing by ensuring that support services are accessible and effective for all families, regardless of their socio-economic status](#)

¹⁰ www.jrf.org.uk/report/relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect-evidence-review.

notes *'There is a strong association between families' socio-economic circumstances and the chances that their children will experience child abuse and neglect'* and mirrors evidence on inequalities in child health and education

Three main conclusions are drawn from the evidence:

- There is a lack of joined up thinking and action about poverty and child abuse and neglect in the UK;
- The UK evidence base is limited, both in terms of official data and research;
- Lessening family poverty across the population is likely to have a positive effect on reducing both the extent and severity of child abuse and neglect in childhood, on the socio-economic consequences of child abuse and neglect in adult life and on the wider economic costs.

Three strategic policy goals are outlined with indicative actions:

- There should be widespread recognition of the strong association between families' socio-economic circumstances and children's chances of being subject to abuse or neglect. It is essential that this association is framed as a public issue and a matter of **avoidable social inequality**, not as a further source of shame and pressure on individual disadvantaged families.
- Programmes should be developed and implemented to rectify the limited data and evidence base in the UK on the extent and nature of the association between families' socio-economic circumstances and child abuse and neglect, the consequences in adult life, and the economic costs, and to test explanatory models through research.
- Effective anti-poverty policies should be developed and connected with policies aimed at reducing inequities in child health and education, explicitly incorporating a focus on their relevance for child abuse and neglect. In particular, the impact of anti-poverty policies on child abuse and neglect for different groups of children should be considered and addressed, especially different age groups, disabled children, all ethnic groups and children living in particularly disadvantaged neighbourhoods

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/child-poverty/the-relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect-an-evidence-review>

Social work practice within this context of adversity and the landscape above is increasingly complex, dealing with the impact of poverty and with greater numbers of children and their families being pulled into poverty. Our value base and practice mean social work as a service and social workers as practitioners pay attention to and deal with structural inequalities but wider need the support of coordinated policies to tackle the root causes.

In 2019, BASW published an Anti Poverty Practice Guide for Social Workers.

<https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/anti-poverty-practice-guide-social-work> We quote from this below

‘Historically, social work has been concerned with poverty not only because of its psychological and physical impact, but also because of the ethical and value base of the profession.’

‘In the last decade fiscal policies, with the introduction of austerity and the drive to reduce central and local government expenditure, have again raised concerns about poverty and its consequences for those that need or use social work services. Repeatedly social workers have reported their concerns about reducing resources and rising needs, fuelled by cuts to local government, welfare and social security support, further exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent economic upheavals.’

A recent paper published by Reform Scotland

<https://www.reformscotland.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Tackling-child-poverty-in-Scotland.pdf> has called for the Scottish Child Payment to be rethought in order to tackle child poverty effectively, with higher priority given to early support and prevention, place-focused interventions, and addressing the circumstances and needs of the poorest families. In this paper, Des McNulty takes a close look at the Scottish Government’s approach to child poverty. While praising this focus, he raises challenging – and potentially worrying – questions about whether the strategy is working as intended. The strategy from 2017-18 onwards shifted from an earlier intention to address “pockets, prospects and places” to one focused on income, mainly through Scottish Child Payment and other grants. There was a change in emphasis and direction from addressing the complexities and different forms and levels of child poverty to prioritising more direct interventions to ‘take children out of poverty’ by boosting family income.

There is growing evidence of the importance of person-centred approaches which take account of specific circumstances of families and the different levels and types of poverty

and vulnerability that exist across Scotland. The evidence assembled by McNulty, suggests that Scotland may not have struck the right balance between addressing insufficient income and rising costs on the one hand and targeting the most vulnerable families with the support they need to climb out of poverty on the other.

The report states that *'Despite the much increased spend, as payment levels more than doubled and eligibility was extended (so that 36% of children now qualify for Scottish Child Payment), the Scottish Government is on course to miss its key child poverty reduction targets'*. This suggests all is not going to plan.

BASW and SWS would concur. Child poverty is complex area, and the results of multi-faceted changes and priorities. A return to addressing those complexities and away from a focus solely on income, would go a long way to meeting the current and long-term needs of our children, the demonstrate our commitment to ensuring a society that values children for who they are now, and who they will be as future adults – meeting the aims of GIRFEC

Recent work in Glasgow, based party on the pathfinder scheme further emphasises this point

'As the Glasgow evidence makes clear, equating income with need does not take sufficient account of the consequences for children's life chances of growing up in areas of multiple deprivation or living in families affected by complex needs which require differentiated responses. Child poverty policy should therefore strike a balance between strength-based approaches, aimed at building resilience by helping families overcome barriers that hold them back and the deficit approach...'

'The pathfinder also highlights the necessity to implement the multiagency collaboration and broad system change in our public services, including the shift towards prevention, that the Christie Commission deemed necessary nearly fifteen years ago'

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