



OUTER HEBRIDES LOCAL CHILD POVERTY ACTION REPORT 2023-2024

Report by Chief Executive

PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to seek approval of the Outer Hebrides Local Child Poverty Action Report (LCPAR) 2023-2024 and the Priority Actions for 2024-2025.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 The first Outer Hebrides Local Child Poverty Action Report and multi-agency Anti-Poverty Strategy was approved by the board of NHS Western Isles, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership in the Autumn of 2019.
- 2.2 An updated LCPAR and Priority Action Plan has now been prepared as required by the Scottish Government. The **Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017** requires that LCPARs are prepared and published *jointly* by Local Authorities and Health Boards. Approval will be sought through NHS Western Isles and the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership (OHCPP) ahead of final publication.
- 2.3 The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 does not require that Local Child Poverty Action Reports are produced by a certain date but simply that they are produced '*as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of each reporting year.*'

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 **It is recommended that the Comhairle approve the Outer Hebrides Local Child Poverty Action Report 2023-24 and Priority Action Plan.**

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Appendix: Outer Hebrides Local Child Poverty Action Report 2023-2024

Background Papers: [Outer Hebrides Anti-Poverty Strategy 2019-2024](#)
[OHCPP Local Outcomes Improvement Plan 2017-27](#)
[Best Start, Bright Futures: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026](#)
[THE COST OF REMOTENESS Reflecting higher living costs in remote rural Scotland when measuring fuel poverty](#)

IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	None
Legal	None
Staffing	None
Assets and Property	None
Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	None
Equalities	Reduce inequality and poverty and promote social mobility
Corporate Strategy	Support resilient communities and quality of life
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	NHS Western Isles, Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership

BACKGROUND

- 5.1 The Scottish Government's second Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 'Best Start, Bright Futures 2022-2026', sets out bold action to drive progress on the national mission to tackle child poverty. The latest official statistics indicate that 26% of children in Scotland lived in relative poverty after deduction of housing costs in 2023.
- 5.2 With the policies in the Delivery Plan in place, it was anticipated that there would be significant improvements by 2023/2024 in child poverty rates against different measures, however the targets have not been met. For example, the Relative Child Poverty target was set at 18% and the outcome was 26%, and the Persistent Poverty target was set at 8% and the outcome was 14%.
- 5.3 However, the Delivery Plan does include key actions such as more than doubling the Scottish Child Payment (SCP), followed by the further increase to £25 per child per week, and extending the SCP to eligible low-income families with children aged under 16 on 14 November 2022. Prior to this the payment was available only to eligible families with a child aged under six. The Plan includes increasing the value of eight Social Security Benefits by 6%, and mitigating the benefit cap as fully as possible within devolved competence.

DETAIL

- 6.1 The cost-of-living crisis continues to have a significant impact on island communities, particularly on young people and their families. Increases in energy, housing, food and consumer good costs have deepened the experience of poverty for many families at a time when the Comhairle has a reduced capacity to support them due to Local Government funding cuts.
- 6.2 The recently formed multi-agency Anti-Poverty Strategic Group provides vision and direction for the anti-poverty work of local partners. The Local Child Poverty Action Report 2023-24 which is the subject of this Report will inform the new Outer Hebrides Anti-Poverty Strategy 2024-2029.
- 6.3 The Anti-Poverty strategy in the Outer Hebrides has to reflect the context of island living with an elevated cost of living in islands driven by higher energy, food and transport costs, challenges in securing affordable and energy-efficient housing, and difficulty in accessing centralised services in an area of highly dispersed population.

- 6.4 Latest data indicates that relative and absolute child poverty in the Outer Hebrides has stabilised since the COVID-19 pandemic but spikes still occur in some ward areas due to movement of families and reduced or removed services. Na h-Eileanan Siar wards in 2023 indicate the highest relative poverty rates for: Steornabhagh a Tuath, An Taobh Siar agus Nis, Sgìre nan Loch, Na Hearadh, Sgìr' Ùige agus Carlabhagh, Uibhist a Deas, Èirisgeigh agus Beinn na Faoghla, Steornabhagh a Deas, ranging from rates of 18.4% to 14.2%.
- 6.5 The Local Child Poverty Action Report 2023-24, which is the subject of this Report, provides an update on delivery of the main policies being pursued by local agencies, and priority actions for 2024-2025. The document reports on delivery across the three drivers of poverty: Increasing Income from Employment; Costs of Living; Eligibility and Take Up of Benefits; and, and other headings, including Available, Affordable and Accessible Transport and Childcare, Other Measures, and Priority Actions.

POLICY UPDATES

- 7.1 **Increasing Income from Employment** Average full-time gross annual earnings for workers in the Western Isles remains 12.3% lower than the Scottish average but this represents an improvement from a 20.2% differential in 2016. A post was recently created within the Comhairle's Employability Service to support parents and young people into work. Support continues for apprenticeships across a number of sectors with 362 Modern/Foundation Apprentices, and 5 Graduate Apprentices, in training across the islands. The Outer Hebrides continue to perform well against other 'Family Group' Local Authority areas in terms of positive destinations and participation in learning, training or work. Minority ethnic families who move to the Outer Hebrides through the resettlement programme continue to be supported to learn English through the Learning Shop's 'English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)' service but there is no Comhairle resource for wider ESOL provision.
- 7.2 **Available, Affordable and Accessible Transport** The last available data (SHS 2022) indicates that 19% of Outer Hebrides households have no access to a car, with the proportion rising to 46% in social housing areas. While this data is not current, trends are unlikely to have changed much. There is therefore a high reliance on public transport and, outwith the main settlements, service frequency does not always facilitate easy travel to and from work. Extension of the Under-22 Concessionary Travel Scheme to ferry (two return journeys available a year currently) and air passengers, where these are the main or only mode of public transport in the area, would ensure parity with mainland peers, enhance access to work, education and leisure and support demand for ferry and air services.
- 7.3 **Available, Affordable and Accessible Childcare** Provision would encourage more parents into employment, raise household incomes and reduce the percentage of children living in household poverty. The Comhairle has invested heavily in funded childcare provision with 19 Comhairle-operated Early Learning and Childcare centres in place offering Gaelic and English provision. Work is underway to increase the pool of prospective Gaelic-speaking childcare staff. The availability of registered private childminders continues to be a constraint with the situation particularly acute in Uist and Barra.
- 7.4 **Costs of Living** On account of their island location, residents of the Outer Hebrides face elevated costs across food, housing, fuel, transport and other household essentials and this contributes significantly to child poverty at the household level. A food shopping in Uist and Barra can be 28% higher than in a comparable mainland area. Scottish Government allocated Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Funding of £257k. Affordable housing for young people is a key stepping stone to independent sustainable living with work ongoing to provide transition housing. Hebridean Housing Partnership report a stable situation in respect of rent arrears but incidents of welfare concern among tenants are increasing. The waiting list for affordable homes continues to grow while the Comhairle, Hebridean Housing Partnership and Tighean Innse Gall continue to deliver houses according to programme.
- 7.5 **Fuel Poverty** A Tighean Innse Gall report for 2023/24 indicates that 82% of island households are in Fuel Poverty with 57% of island homes built before 1975 and 75% of homes detached, rendering them

vulnerable to climatic exposure on all four walls. Reliance on fossil fuels for heating remains high and a high proportion of homes are resistant to energy efficiency measures rendering them unsuitable for modern, renewable energy based interventions. The situation is being exacerbated by persistently high energy prices, and an energy cap that is not eligible for island proofing.

- 7.6 **Food Insecurity** is a significant and growing challenge which often corresponds with Fuel Poverty. Food Banks are active across the Outer Hebrides but activity is difficult to report on as many Churches and voluntary groups operate informal Food Bank services outwith the formal monitoring regime. Community Food projects and work by Citizens Advice Bureaux, Third Sector Hebrides and others continue to benefit areas of highest relative and absolute poverty.
- 7.7 **Eligibility and Take Up of Benefits** The Comhairle's Financial Inclusion service and the Department for Work and Pensions continue to support people access the benefits they are entitled to. Several benefits directly support families with children such as the Pregnancy and Baby Payment, Best Start, the Scottish Child Payment and Carer Support Payments. Scottish Child Payments issued to clients totalled 7170 allocating £1,289,580 marking an increase from 3840 and an allocation of £552,820 in 22/23 following the extension to eligible families with children under 16 in November 2022. During 2023/24, the Financial Inclusion service supported 130 households across the Outer Hebrides, resulting in financial gains of £732,194. A range of vouchers and grants are available to families in poverty, and these range from free school meals and energy vouchers, to white goods and Christmas gifts.
- 7.8 **Other Measures** Get Heard Scotland was a national campaign to ensure that lived experiences of poverty were captured and represented in planning and strategy. Although the national campaign has closed, NHS Western Isles have continued with a Get Heard Hebrides project. During 2023/24, 48 interviewees across the Outer Hebrides identified rising food costs, rising energy prices, and ferry disruptions as their main concerns. The Comhairle's Early Years Family Support Team held a Family and Child event in Stornoway Town Hall, showcasing the support available through parenting support, financial inclusion, employability and health and wellbeing. This was a highly successful event which will be repeated in future. Challenge Poverty Week is another national event coordinated by the Poverty Alliance, and a public information campaign from 2-8 October 2023 covering themes such as housing, food, and transport added value to the work being carried out locally.
- 7.9 **Priority Areas for Future Planning** It is recommended that the new Strategic Anti-Poverty Steering Group prioritise the streamlining of support mechanisms to avoid duplication, and alongside the wider OHCPP continue poverty mitigation including fuel and transport poverty, seek alignment of Scottish Educational Management Information Software with Child Poverty data to provide additional insight into local challenges, delivering of Rights-Based services, and a cross-island publicity campaign to build on the benefit maximisation work already underway.

CONCLUSION

- 8.1 Child Poverty continues to impact on Outer Hebrides communities at a time when the Comhairle has reduced capacity to combat it. However, by streamlining services, working effectively with partners, improved data sharing and data literacy, real reductions in Child Poverty are achievable.
- 8.2 The new Strategic Anti-Poverty Group provides an excellent forum for analysing Child Poverty issues and developing collaborative solutions. The Costs Crisis Fund has supported the appointment of a Strategy Officer whose role will include progressing the priorities of the Strategic Anti-Poverty Group.
- 8.3 The Outer Hebrides Local Child Poverty Action Report 2023/24 provides an update on the extent of Child Poverty across the islands and outlines current efforts to address the issue. It provides a useful baseline as the Comhairle seeks to escalate its efforts through the new Strategic Anti-Poverty Group and its newly appointed Coordinator.