

Outer Hebrides Local Child Poverty Action Report 2023 – 24

Delivery Update

November 2024



COMHAIROLE NAN EILEAN SIAR



Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
National Targets and Duties	5
Poverty in Remote and Island Communities	6
Western Isles Child Poverty Profile.....	8
Targeted Support Services	9
2023/24 Areas of Priority.....	11
2. INCREASING INCOME FROM EMPLOYMENT	15
Further and Higher Education including Apprenticeships.....	15
Employment Opportunities for the Young Workforce	16
Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)	17
Positive Destinations and Participation Rates for Young People	18
English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).....	19
3. AVAILABLE, AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORT, AND CHILDCARE	20
Transport Solutions.....	20
Childcare	22
4. COSTS OF LIVING.....	23

Minimum Income Guarantee implications	23
Independent Living for Young People.....	24
Affordable and Available Housing	25
Fuel Poverty	26
Energy Bills and Energy Efficiency.....	26
Food Insecurity.....	28
5. ELIGIBILITY AND TAKE UP OF BENEFITS	29
Department of Works and Pensions.....	29
Social Security Benefits.....	30
Financial Inclusion Team.....	31
Distribution of Vouchers, Grants and Other Support.....	32
6. WHAT ELSE HAS BEEN DONE?	34
Get Heard Hebrides	34
Place Standard	35
Child and Family Events	35
Challenge Poverty Week 2023.....	36
Priority Areas for Future Planning	37

1. INTRODUCTION

The Cost of Living Crisis continues to have a significant impact on our island communities, and particularly on the lives of our children, young people and their families. For many, it has deepened their experiences of poverty and exacerbated impacts on their health and wellbeing. Communities are experiencing poverty and hardship at a time when councils have a reduced capacity to support them.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines poverty as:

“When a person’s resources are well below their minimum needs, including the need to take part in society.”

Child poverty is not inevitable, and by deploying all the available resources we want to reinforce our commitment to improving the lives of children and young people and their families in the Western Isles. Tackling child poverty is a national mission and it will take collaborative efforts from all involved to alleviate the impacts of poverty which are felt by many. There are incredible efforts throughout the island communities to support those who are experiencing poverty, and families and individuals in crisis.

Communities have seen escalating inflation in energy costs, housing costs, food costs, and consumer goods over the past few years which has increased the challenge in how to mitigate these impacts and prevent further deprivation. For families already experiencing poverty and hardship, they can feel the biggest impacts of further increases to their expenditures.

To tackle child poverty locally, an Anti-Poverty Steering Group was established to provide leadership and direction for the Anti-Poverty Strategy and Action Plans. An additional subgroup was established with a focus and remit towards Child Poverty. The Steering Group meets regularly to develop a vision and annual priorities, including how best to direct resources towards the appropriate services and projects. The group enables effective communication and partnership working across agencies, third sector organisations and communities. From the £1.028m Costs Crisis Fund awarded to the Comhairle, there was an approval in June 2024 for a sum of this funding, in the order of £40k per annum over 3 years to be allocated towards a post to support anti-poverty work, costs of living mitigation, and other policy work. There was also an award of £257k through the Scottish Government’s Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Fund that provides financial assistance to island communities facing cost of living challenges.

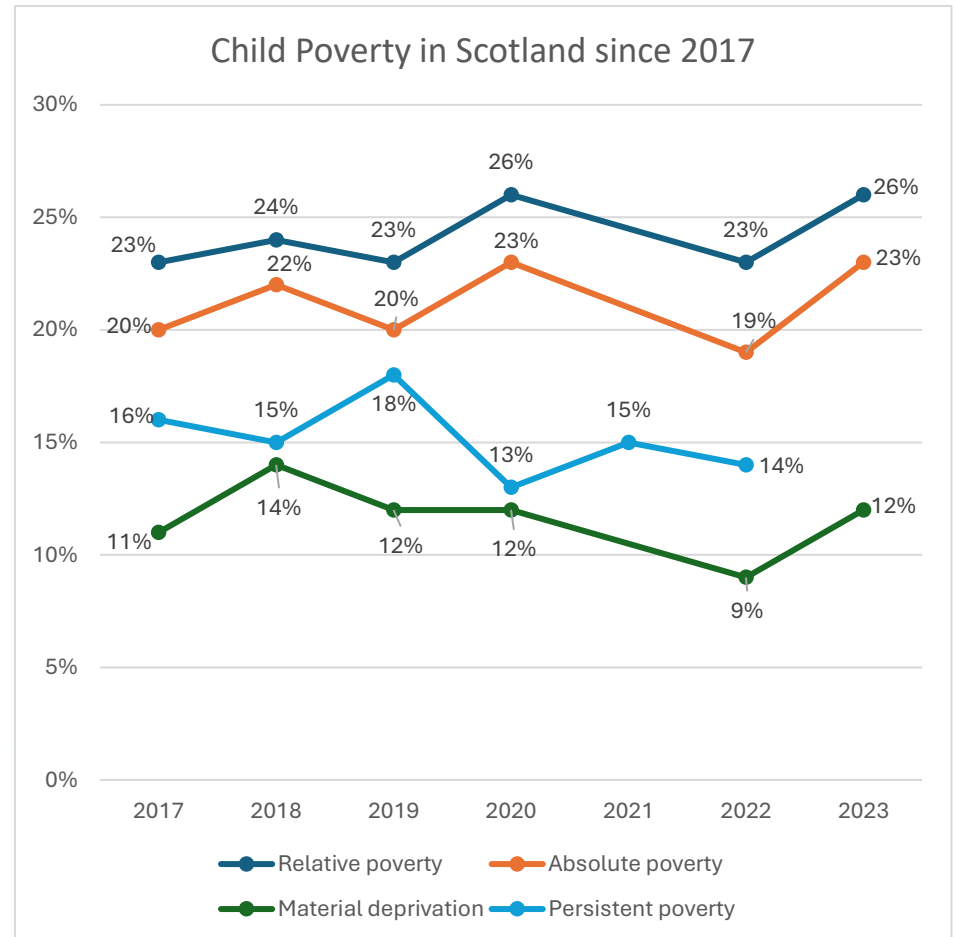
The [Child Poverty \(Scotland\) Act 2017](#) places a duty on Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Western Isles Health Board to prepare and publish an annual, joint Local Child Poverty Action Report (LCPAR) which sits alongside the wider [Western Isles Anti-Poverty Strategy 2019 - 24](#). This LCPAR will report on the activity being undertaken locally to mitigate the drivers of child poverty, and suggested actions to carry forward over the next year, which will assist in informing the new Western Isles Anti-Poverty Strategy 2024 -2029. Work on the new strategy is delayed so that it can be established whether a separate strategy for Child Poverty will be required. This Outer Hebrides Local Child Poverty Action Report will raise awareness of the multitude of services and support available across the islands by the Local Authority, Health Board, Third Sector and volunteers within the wider community, and to share the ambition for the forthcoming year.

National Targets and Duties

The Scottish Government's second [Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-26](#) (Best Start, Bright Futures), sets out bold action to drive progress on the national mission to tackle child poverty. This delivery plan is to take forward the mission of the Scottish Government via the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 to eradicate child poverty by 2030.

The Scottish Government identified national targets to be met by 2030, that of children living in households in Scotland:

- **Less than 10% fall within relative poverty**
 - This is a measure of whether those in the lowest income households are seeing their incomes rise in real terms
- **Less than 5% fall within absolute poverty**
 - This is a measure of whether those in the lowest income households are keeping pace with the growth of incomes in the economy
- **Less than 5% fall within combined low income and material deprivation**
- **Less than 5% fall within persistent poverty**
 - someone is considered in persistent poverty when they have been in poverty for 3 or more of the last 4 years, which has significant long term impacts on their health, well-being and life chances



Source: Child Poverty Summary, Scottish Government

The Plan sets out the immediate action the Scottish Government will take to put cash in the pockets of families now. This includes the Scottish Child Payment of £26.70 per week per child for families already in receipt of current benefits. This also includes uprating eight Scottish social security payments by 6% to ensure these payments keep their real-terms values for families and working in partnership with services to mitigate the benefit cap, as fully as it can within the limits of devolved powers.

The Plan sets out the action the Government will take to drive progress in the medium to longer term to enable thousands of families to break the cycle of poverty. This includes significantly strengthening employment services to support parents to enter, sustain and progress in work, backed by up to £81 million in 2022-23, and further strengthening support to parents through a new Parental Transition Fund to tackle financial barriers parents face in entering the labour market, particularly over the initial period of employment, investing up to £15 million each year.

With the policies in the Best Start, Bright Futures Plan implemented, it was anticipated that by 2023/24 there would be significant improvements in the levels of child poverty across different measures, however this has so far not materialised.

	Target by 2023	Target by 2030	Current
Relative child poverty	18%	10%	26% - Off track
Absolute child poverty	14%	5%	23% - Off track
Material deprivation	8%	5%	12% - Off track
Persistent poverty	8%	5%	14% - Off track

Poverty in Remote and Island Communities

Poverty can impact on every aspect of a child’s life, from growing up cold or hungry, in damp homes, or missing out on typical childhood experiences and socialisation opportunities. It can be more difficult to understand the impact and prevalence of poverty on rural communities such as the Western Isles as the accuracy of the measures commonly used to understand poverty and inequality (such as the [Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation](#)) can be undermined by the dispersed nature of rural populations. Some of the challenges more common to rural communities can include:

The elevated cost of living in remote and rural settings

The cost of living tends to be significantly higher in remote, rural and island communities, but this can be masked by some poverty statistics which emphasise income over outgoings. The Scottish

Affairs Committee conducted an enquiry and presented a report on the [Cost of Living: Impact on Rural Communities in Scotland](#) to parliament in 2024 which highlighted the increased costs for populations living in rural and island communities in Scotland. In particular, the report highlighted:

- the increased energy costs, energy challenges and subsequent increase in fuel poverty,
- that food insecurity and food poverty disproportionately impact rural communities as food shopping prices are already more expensive than Scottish mainland,
- the challenges in accessing public transport within these communities, the higher costs of fuel impacting on drivers, and connections to mainland Scotland via ferry and air travel.

Challenges in securing good, affordable and insulated housing

For families requiring housing, this can be exceptionally difficult to source on the Western Isles. Demand for affordable housing far outstrips the available supply, and as a result, the prices of private rental properties in the Highlands and Islands see above inflation increases. Data from the Office of National Statistics demonstrates these increases for two-bed, three-bed, and four-bed rental properties:



	Average Price March 2020	Average Price March 2021	Average Price March 2022	Average Price March 2023	Average Price March 2024	Percentage increase 2020 - 24
2-bed rental	£582	£592	£605	£629	£641	10.1%
3-bed rental	£760	£782	£792	£832	£862	13.4%
4-bed rental	£1184	£1231	£1269	£1315	£1372	15.9%

The Western Isles has also seen the availability of housing stock decrease, due to the increase in Airbnb properties. The Western Isles remains the Local Authority with the highest rate of Airbnb's listed in Scotland seeing a rise from [16.51 to 17.79 properties per 1000 population](#) in the past year alone. Furthermore, the older age of the Western Isles property stock and the high prevalence of these homes are detached which presents additional challenges to residents in heating and maintaining heat in their homes and corresponds with the highest fuel poverty rate in Scotland.

The challenge in seeking and accessing support in close-knit communities

Most support services are typically centralised within Stornoway town centre, which can result in access challenges for people who live in further away communities and without adequate transport. The reliance on transport can result in other difficulties such as accessing work via limited bus transport, or the costs associated with public transport for minimum wage earners. It can be disempowering for those who do want to work but find a significant portion of their earnings are spent on transport. This can leave people feeling like they are better off accessing benefits instead of employment.

For families and vulnerable young people in the Western Isles it can feel difficult to access services due to worrying about stigma, judgement or seeking support from people known to them. Crisis support services such as food banks and baby banks report that they rely on building and maintaining trusting relationships to distribute parcels of support discreetly.

Western Isles Child Poverty Profile

The most recent local child poverty estimates for the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar for both relative and absolute poverty have stabilised since the COVID-19 pandemic, however some ward areas have shown significant increases or decreases, which could be attributed to a multitude of reasons including:

- Families relocating within the Western Isles, families relocating off the Western Isles, or families relocating to the Western Isles;
- Changes in access to services e.g. new services available, closures of services, or families have improved access to some services.

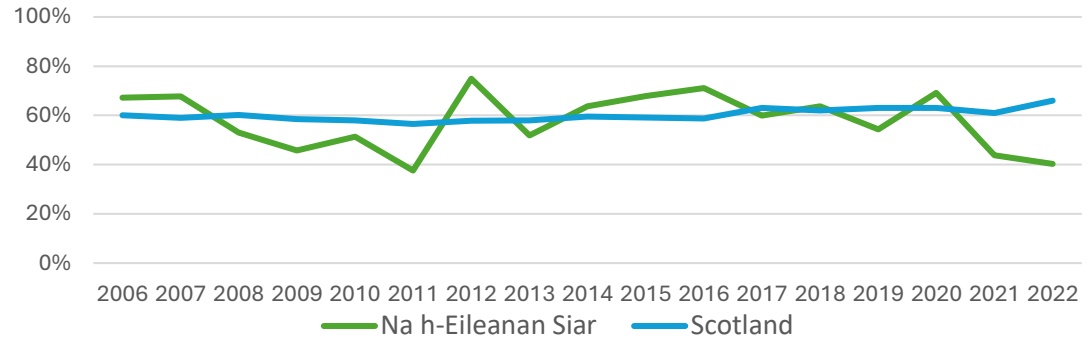
Ward area	The number and percentage of children living in relative poverty by ward area:															
	Number and % of children 2020				Number and % of children 2021				Number and % of children 2022				Number and % of children 2023			
	Relative poverty		Absolute poverty		Relative poverty		Absolute poverty		Relative poverty		Absolute poverty		Relative poverty		Absolute poverty	
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	602	14.2%	496	11.7%	492	11.9%	383	9.3%	593	14.6%	458	11.3%	582	14.3%	471	11.6%
An Taobh Siar agus Nis	50	13.3%	39	10.3%	46	12.6%	32	8.7%	62	17.0%	44	12.1%	63	17.3%	52	14.3%
Barraigh agus Bhatarsaigh	49	19.8%	42	16.9%	33	13.2%	27	10.8%	39	14.8%	33	12.5%	35	13.3%	16	6.1%
Loch a Tuath	41	7.4%	37	6.7%	44	8.5%	34	6.5%	53	10.6%	47	9.4%	49	9.8%	37	7.4%
Na Hearadh	28	11.2%	20	8.0%	20	8.2%	16	6.6%	33	14.3%	24	10.4%	36	15.6%	32	13.9%
Sgir' Uige agus Carlabhagh	38	20.9%	34	18.7%	38	20.9%	33	18.1%	35	17.9%	33	16.9%	29	14.9%	23	11.8%
Sgìre an Rubha	42	11.3%	27	7.2%	23	6.5%	18	5.1%	46	13.1%	24	6.8%	29	8.3%	30	8.5%
Sgìre nan Loch	47	17.3%	41	15.1%	32	11.6%	23	8.4%	40	14.4%	35	12.6%	46	16.6%	42	15.2%
Steornabhagh a Deas	97	14.7%	74	11.2%	71	11.0%	49	7.6%	85	13.5%	61	9.7%	89	14.2%	71	11.3%
Steornabhagh a Tuath	105	16.4%	95	14.8%	78	12.3%	69	10.9%	96	16.2%	80	13.5%	109	18.4%	89	15.0%
Uibhist a Deas, Eirisgeigh agus Beinn na Faoghla	84	14.3%	66	11.2%	84	14.8%	66	11.7%	86	15.8%	71	13.0%	78	14.3%	67	12.3%
Uibhist a Tuath	23	11.2%	16	7.8%	16	8.0%	16	8.0%	17	8.3%	14	6.8%	24	11.7%	15	7.3%

The data on each current ward area is held from 2015 – 2023, however the 2022 election saw new boundaries drawn for the electoral wards, and the number of wards increased from nine to eleven.

The Western Isles has a significantly lower percentage of children in working households than the national percentage, and the lack of employment and therefore of income from employment, increases the risk of poverty.

Local providers of foodbanks, baby banks and warm spaces also shared that they noticed an increase in requests for support from working families, raising concerns that income alone is not enough to protect from the impacts of poverty and financial insecurity, particularly if their income has not risen in line with inflation.

% Children in working households



Source: ONS Annual Population Survey, Household Economic Activity Status

Targeted Support Services

To achieve the outcomes set by the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and Health Boards need to have a clear vision to ensure adequate support for the Six Priority Families. These families were identified by the Scottish Government as the types of families at highest risk of experiencing poverty and financial hardship.

In addition to this, we recognise that Care Experienced Children and Young People (CECYP) are a group at risk of poverty and hardship. In line with The Promise and the Western Isles Integrated Children’s Services Plan (ICSP), there is a targeted focus towards providing additional supports for CECYP.



The Western Isles has several services for children, young people and their families which aim to support the Six Priority Families and CECYP, including English for [Speakers of other Languages \(ESOL\)](#) and the [Cearns Community Fridge](#). Some of these services have been developed through the new Whole Family Wellbeing Funding (WFWF), some are established by Third Sector, and many are volunteer established and run. Some examples are indicated below:

The Shed: parenting groups and Safe Families

Through WFWF funding, now has 3 drop-in parenting groups:

- Little Stars
- Who Let the Coves Out – for dads/ male guardians
- Music and Rhyme Time

Engaged with **81 families** with the youngest Little Star aged one week old. Currently supporting **16 babies under 6 months**, and parents are reporting highly positive feedback.

Safe Families uses a volunteer-led intergenerational approach to provide families with short breaks. Has engaged with **27 families** through **24 volunteers**.

Barra Children's Centre

Barra Children's Centre is a 'grass roots' community organisation delivering facilities and services to children aged 0-12 and pre-school families. The service is **inclusive of all priority families** and aims to:

- Reduce the impact of rural isolation and **increase children's wellbeing, confidence and skills,**
- Provide opportunities for children and young families to **play, learn and socialise** together, and to **access support** from peers and professionals,
- Promote physical activity and healthy choices to **address local health inequalities,**
- Provision of **Bookbug and baby massage** to families in Barra.

Pointers Young Mums Group

Early Years staff are now supporting the delivery of a **second Young Mums group** due to the increased demand. **13 mums** are supported across these groups from age **15 -25 years**.

Pointers – Young People Services

Pointers run a **Young Carers group** for P4 – S6 young people who have a close family member they care for. They also have **two drop-in sessions** for young people on Wednesdays and Fridays after school. The Cearns Community Fridge will drop off food and soup due to young people attending who are hungry.

Extended Learning Resources (ELR)

ELR is an **education resource** to support young people who are struggling with or excluded from mainstream education. Several pupils who attend this are **Care Experienced** or have personal circumstances which might make them **vulnerable to becoming Care Experienced**. Through **WFWF funding**, a new full-time worker was recruited with a specific focus towards supporting children on the edges of care as an **early intervention and prevention service**.

"I wouldn't go to school if it wasn't for my support worker." – ELR pupil

'Oisean a' Chalman,' Baby Bank

'Oisean a' Chalman,' Baby Bank began in December 2019 just before the Covid Pandemic hit. The Baby Bank began by providing: Baby milk, nappies, sterilising fluid & machines, underwear, winter clothing, prams, cots, baby bouncers, baby carriers, safety gates, toiletries and fuel & clothing vouchers, premature baby clothes, to families requesting assistance. **It is a volunteer-established and -run service.**

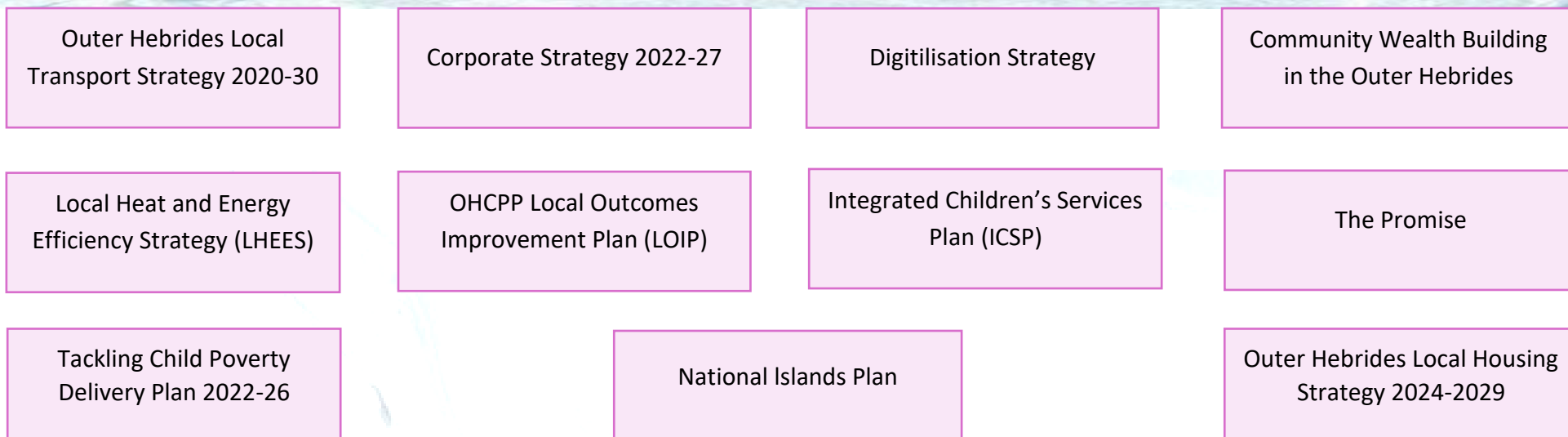
What began as a small baby bank providing for the Parish of Uig quickly developed to cover the whole of the Western Isles **providing for adults, the elderly especially, those who are socially and financially isolated, and refugee families from Ukraine & Afghanistan.**

Requests for assistance are by self-referral from families, and referrals from professionals within NHS Health Visiting and CNES Education. Three new areas of challenge for the service are:

- 1. Working families just above the benefits qualification line, some with 2 or 3 jobs and on low income experiencing poverty**
- 2. The service is now seeing a sharp increase in requests to provide for low-income elderly people who need warm clothes, bedding, incontinence aids, toiletries as they too see their disposable income being eroded through inflated energy costs as they seek to heat their homes.**
- 3. There has been an increase in requests over the past 12 months for clothing for school-age children**

2023/24 Areas of Priority

The LCPAR is aligned closely with the below long term strategies with actions to mitigate the impacts of child poverty. The Outer Hebrides Local Housing Strategy, which is currently in preparation, underwent a survey to gather information on housing matters. The greatest challenges respondents thought their communities faced related to population decline, fuel poverty, the supply of housing, affordability issues, and the cost of construction amongst other issues. Over 30% of respondents felt that the single action that would have a major and positive impact on the operation of the housing system in their areas would be to increase the supply of housing. Over half of respondents were unaware of how their home would be affected by the proposed new housing standard for energy efficiency, and over 76% stated that they would not be able to fund any additional works to meet the standard. Over 80% of responses came from individuals in the 24-44 and 45-64 age groups. Engagement of older and younger age groups with the consultation was lower.



Areas of priority for tackling the drivers of child poverty are connected to actions as set out in the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership (OHCPP) Local Outcomes Improvement Plan (LOIP). The actions taken forward across the OHCPP over the past five years also correspond to and are further detailed within the [Anti-Poverty Strategy 2019-2024](#). For the purpose of this Report, actions and activities undertaken over the past year have been related to the actions identified within the LOIP and are supportive of the [Child Poverty Theory of Change](#).

The Outer Hebrides LCPAR 2022-23 identified additional actions which continue to be progressed and to be built upon to shape future policies and plans.

This Report highlights some of these actions taken, and the actions taken to address the key drivers of child poverty over the 2023/24 reporting period.

The key drivers of child poverty are summarized below in Diagram 1, and generally can be categorised in respect to three main categories:

1. **Income from employment**
2. **Costs of Living**
3. **Income from social security and benefits**

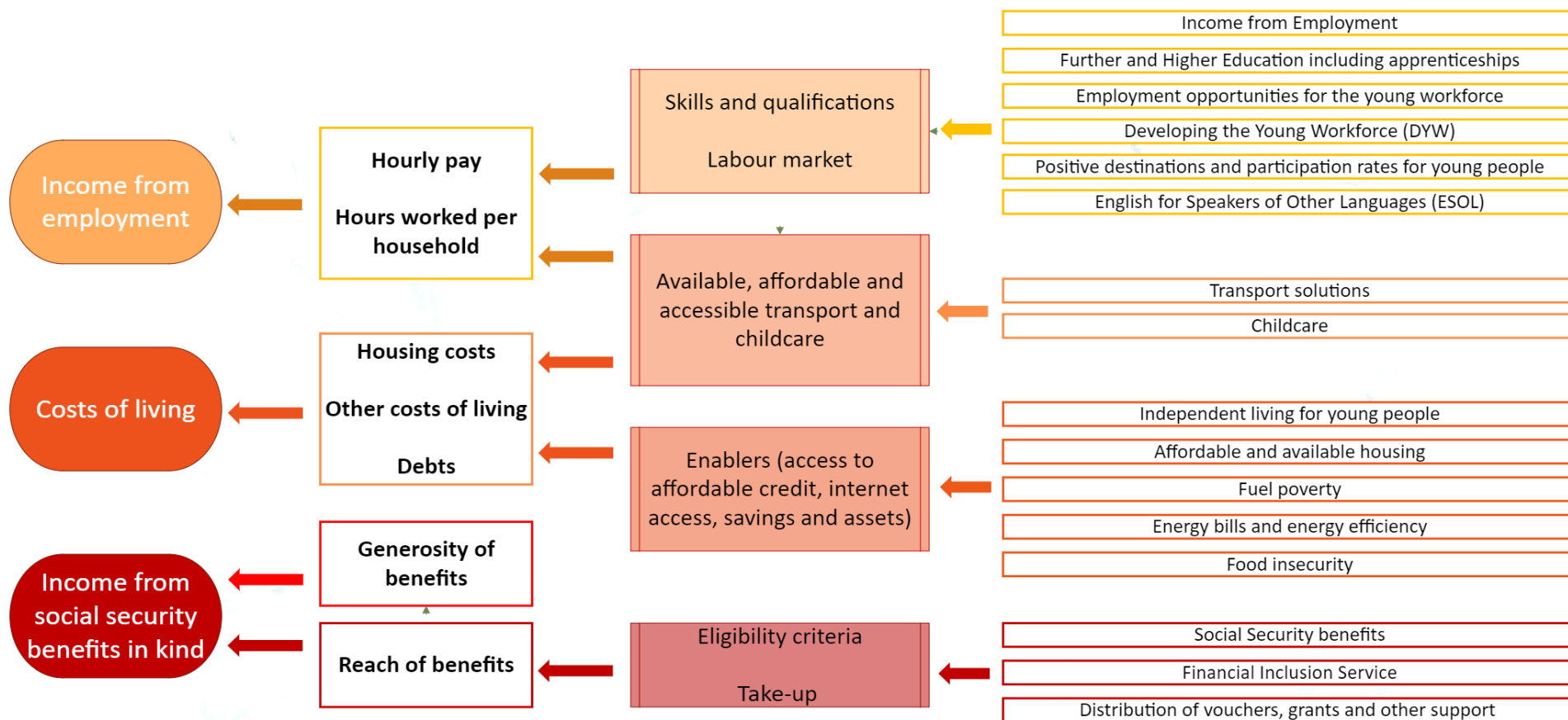
By increasing **income from employment**, we can help families avoid poverty. While there is room to expect improvements in the economy and in turn people's lives, this will take time to be seen in child poverty rates. Data shows some progress, but slow in terms of increasing pay and hours, which could mean limited progress on in-work poverty. Employability policies in place can have positive outcomes for parents to assist in meeting of targets. The Western Isles recognises the need to support our young workforce to achieve through education, have opportunity through apprenticeships and the right support for long term work.

The cost of living is a key challenge for low-income families. There are key concerns particularly around: fuel poverty, food insecurity and transport costs. The Western Isles has long term strategies such as the [Outer Hebrides Local Transport Strategy 2020-30](#) and [Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy \(LHEES\)](#) to reduce the impacts of the cost of living. For some families, pressures have eased slightly over the past year as food price inflation has reduced and fuel prices have decreased, however too many people remain trapped in poverty. The [Citizens Advice Scotland Food Insecurity Pilot](#) showed the repeat need for client cards and grants provided in the Western Isles was at 48%, which was the third highest of the 9 pilot areas in Scotland.

Income from social security is in many cases a lifeline for families. We see clear and positive impacts of social security and benefits in-kind on families. There are many local charities and services distributing grants, vouchers, food boxes, appliances and other supports to the most vulnerable families to assist with their immediate needs.

The Islands Costs Crisis Emergency Fund was established by the Scottish Government to help island communities with higher costs of living than the mainland, including a colder climate, higher fuel and energy costs and reduced consumer choice. The allocation to the Comhairle for 23/24 was £257k. Awards were made to the below local organisations to fund projects that assist households with fuel vouchers and food vouchers, lower cost food from food markets/food service to vulnerable people, foodbank assistance, warm spaces, and support towards free school meal top up holiday payments.

- Western Isles Citizens Advice Service – WICAS Food Insecurity and Fuel Poverty assistance scheme, allocation of £27,500
- Hebridean Housing Partnership – Fuel Voucher Emergency Fund, allocation of £20,006
- Tighean Innse Gall - Heating Fuel Vouchers Western Isles, allocation of £68,410
- Tagsa Uibhist - Uist & Barra Community Food Resilience Project, allocation of £31,500
- FoodClub – Stornoway FoodClub, allocation of £61,000
- Warm Spaces – Warm Spaces Hubs, allocation of £20,000
- Free School Meals Top Up Holiday Payments - allocation of £20,000



Western Isles Citizens Advice Service (WICAS) reported for 2023/24, an increase in the complexity of cases and the support required by clients. A significant increase of 48% on advice surrounding Finance and Charitable support was reported, showing the effect that the cost-of-living is continuing to have on those in our communities. They supported more than 147 clients with dependent children on a wide range of issues.

WICAS supports clients by carrying out income maximization exercises to ensure clients are receiving all financial supports they are eligible for, and considers what other assistance may be available to them by referring on as required. During the 2023/24 reporting period as mentioned above, WICAS also supported clients in the form of food shopping vouchers and energy costs support, while working alongside the local foodbanks and Fuel Bank Foundation to ensure clients do not need to choose between heating and eating.

2. INCREASING INCOME FROM EMPLOYMENT

In 2023, the average full-time gross annual earnings for workers in the Western Isles was £29,992, which is 12.3% lower than the average for Scotland at £33,690 (ONS, 2023). There is, however, a significant reduction since 2016 where there was a 20.2% difference between annual earnings in the Western Isles compared to the average in Scotland. One vision of the LOIP was a commitment to increasing average household income to support a reduction in poverty and health inequalities, recognizing that increasing growth and tackling inequality are **mutually supportive**.

The role of the Employability Child Poverty Coordinator continues, at a local level to drive alignment and integration between employability support and the wrap-around services required to support parents to increase their income through employment. All parents on low incomes are eligible to receive support. This year, there is a focus on the six priority family groups identified as being at highest risk of experiencing poverty: Lone parent families, the large majority of which are headed by women; Families which include a disabled adult or child; Families with three or more children; minority ethnic families; Families with a child under one year old; and Families where the mother is under 25 years of age

Through a strong partnership approach the Child Poverty Working Group continue to collectively collaborate to meet the above aims. Their outcomes and updates are presented to the OHCPP Anti-Poverty Sub-Group to share good practice and avoid any areas of duplication/ crossover. The Group's focus is on partnership working to achieve best outcomes for families through employability options and identified need. This is managed through regular engagement and collaboration and to meet the refreshed aims, the current focus is on an outreach service. This will ensure information on financial support and employability services is shared across every community. The group continues to work towards a more streamlined, and confidential referral process, whereby individuals can access services directly through a simplified questionnaire from a QR code promoted across leaflets and literature.

Employment in 'lower paid' occupations, 2023

Na h-Eileanan Siar	Scotland
21%	27%

Source: ONS Annual Population Survey

Further and Higher Education including Apprenticeships

“Increased local provision of further and higher education, research and development, and training programmes in key skills related to current and future high quality employment opportunities” - LOIP

Through the Skills Development Scotland Funding, the Comhairle continues to amend the annual contract to meet the changing accreditation requirements of the community. This supports the ever-growing number of young people wishing to stay on the Western Isles to continue their learning and supports low income homes as young people can live, earn and learn locally. Areas such as: Leadership and Management, Engineering, Business, Teaching, Distilling, Media and Community Development have been developed following a direct ask from industry.

To support the above accreditation, pathways have been developed through the following:

Foundation Apprenticeship are work-based learning opportunities for senior phase secondary pupils. The FA can be taken over one or two years for S4-S6 pupils. Pupils spend time out of school with local employers and complete the FA alongside their school subjects. The FA's have been developed to help young people gain valuable, real work experience across work-based learning while they are still in school. By giving young people earlier exposure to the world of work, their skills, experience, and knowledge is developed at a much earlier stage. There are 239 apprentices in training (2-year cohort).

Modern Apprenticeship: The dual purpose of the MA Programme is to support individuals to learn while in work and for economic growth across Scotland. MAs are a joint investment between employers and public funding. Employers invest the greater amount through wage costs and on-going support, and public funding contributes towards the cost of training. SDS administers the Scottish Government's funding contribution toward the cost of training for employees that employers wish to support through an approved MA framework. There are 123 apprentices in training.

Graduate Apprenticeship: Graduate Apprenticeships (GAs) are designed around the needs of business and industry and allow employees to continue to work while they attain their degree over the course of up to four years. There are 5 apprentices in training.

Through the above pathways, The Comhairle continues to focus on workforce planning to support the delivery needs of services. For Social Care, Child Care and Business, the primary focus is on the facilitation of a trained, skilled, and valued workforce. The upskilling of employees within Social Care Services is required for SSSC registration and is paramount to how successful the outcomes will be for service users, and for the service's improvement agenda.

As a bilingual authority and to support the cultural needs of our communities, all apprentices and staff are offered Gaelic Tuition at learner, intermediate and fluency levels.

Employment Opportunities for the Young Workforce

“The creation of well-paid full time employment opportunities for the younger working age population with associated skills development” - LOIP

Key elements in developing an inclusive local economy through the delivery of an employability system in the local labour market, are the creating of a responsive and aligned approach that helps people of all ages who face the greatest barriers to progress towards, into and to sustain skills development and employment. Both to equip people with the skills that the local economy needs, and to develop the self-worth and growth of these individuals can support them to reach their full potential.

The local employability landscape has changed enormously over the past two years, with both employers and those with barriers needing more support than ever. The support offered through Employability Grant funding is instrumental to the growth and sustainability of our communities.

Employability funding ensures a person-centred approach is taken and additional key worker support is kept in place to deliver support improve life chances and move people into/better paid employment aimed at the following:

- Lone Parents
- Parents with disabilities
- Young parents age 25 years and less
- Minority ethnic families
- Families with a disabled child
- Families with 3 or more children
- Families where the youngest child is under 1 year
- Young people with multiple barriers to employment
- Long Term Unemployed

Developing the Young Workforce (DYW)

To support the young people of the islands prepare for the world of work the DYW team continue to work directly with employers to provide inspirational opportunities to help young people understand and develop their understanding of local industry. This allows them to develop their skills to move into work. Through the annual personalisation and choice exercise, the team continue to influence education, amend the curriculum, and shape the islands future workforce.

Work experience is strongly encouraged amongst school pupils, with 91% pupils taking up the opportunity. Work experience is an opportunity for people to experience firsthand what working in a particular job within the community is like. Not only does it enable individuals to assess whether a job or employer meets their expectations, work experience also benefits the individuals by giving them the opportunity to:

- Build confidence.
- Establish a daily work routine.

- Learn new skills.
- Increase understanding of Comhairle Opportunities.
- Chance to prove that they are valuable and productive workers.
- Gain a reference for future employment.

Through the Nicolson Institute’s recent HMI Inspection, the work of the DYW and Work Experience team was highlighted as a key strength:

“Almost all young people are supported effectively to plan and achieve positive postschool destinations. They are supported to do so through effective partnership working.”

Positive Destinations and Participation Rates for Young People

The Western Isles consistently performs well against the Scotland average and Local Government Benchmarking Framework (LGBF) Family Group average for the proportion of pupils entering positive destinations after leaving school as a proportion of all school leavers. Positive destinations can be higher or further education, employment, training, voluntary work, or personal skills development. The LGBF is an online tool to benchmark performance against other Local Authorities and against our Family Group (Aberdeenshire, Argyll & Bute, Dumfries & Galloway, Highland, Orkney islands, Scottish Borders and Shetland Islands) of comparable Local Authorities.

CHN11 - Proportion of pupils entering positive destinations

	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Local Authority	95.1%	96.8%	96.6%	96.3%	96.6%	98.1%	95.6%	98.4%	97.4%	97.1%	97.6%	98.3%
FG Average	91.0%	92.8%	92.5%	93.5%	93.0%	93.8%	93.7%	95.0%	93.1%	94.8%	95.6%	96.2%
Scotland	90.3%	91.9%	92.6%	93.2%	93.5%	93.9%	94.6%	95.0%	93.3%	95.5%	95.7%	95.9%

Table 1: Proportion of pupils entering positive destinations, LGBF

Similarly, the Western Isles continues to outperform the Scotland average LGBF Family Group average for the participation rate for 16-19 year olds, which is the proportion of 16-19 year olds engaged in learning, training or work – work includes volunteering. Within the context of [Opportunities for All](#), all participation is positive and should be regarded as transitional – education, training and volunteering are important phases in a young person’s life that can improve their job options but are not destinations in themselves.

CHN21 - Participation rate for 16-19 year olds (%)

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Local Authority	95.8%	96.9%	97.6%	95.5%	95.5%	95.6%	96.2%	97.6%
FG Average	89.8%	90.2%	91.0%	90.5%	91.2%	91.6%	91.7%	93.6%
Scotland	90.4%	91.1%	91.8%	91.6%	92.1%	92.2%	92.4%	94.3%

Table 2: Participation rate for 16-19 year olds, LGBF

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

The Learning Shop service supports minority ethnic families to resettle into the Western Isles, by providing support to learn English, signposting to other support services, help to understand local culture and practice, and access to the ESOL foodbank as required.

ESOL aims to support families who have resettled, to integrate into the Western Isles culture, and develop their learning and language skills so that they can access employment or support their children to learn in local schools or with homework.

Staff provide support to clients to learn how to budget and manage their own finances and signpost for additional support needed.

The service is also currently supporting Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) who are resident in Stornoway and attending local education. All UASC have accessed the Learning Shop foodbank. These young people are living alone and have limited social security benefits and limited ability to communicate in English language.

The Adult Learning Service is no longer delivering general ESOL provision therefore it is limited in its ability to provide support to all minority ethnic families who need it. Currently, Comhairle ESOL provision is only available through the resettlement remit.

Many migrant workers have been impacted by the mothballing of the Stornoway Bakkafrost plant, and with no current Comhairle ESOL provision and the links with migrant workers and their families that this brings, there is no direct information on the number of children affected.

At present parents, wishing to access general ESOL provision to help them support their children's English learning in schools, are required to access General ESOL provision, which is available online, through UHI North, West and Hebrides.

3. AVAILABLE, AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORT, AND CHILDCARE

Two of the biggest barriers to people seeking employment in the Western Isles and increasing their income is the reliance on limited public transport, and access to appropriate childcare. For many families living out with the main town of Stornoway, it can be difficult to rely on public transport to take you to and from work. Concessionary travel is available for passengers who are under 22, disabled or over 60 years. While fares are comparatively low due to a prominent level of subsidy from the Comhairle, unlike on the mainland there are no options available for unlimited weekly/monthly travel, or off-peak lower price points. Young people are particularly vulnerable to transport poverty. Unlike mainland areas island residents also must include the cost of ferry and/or air travel into their budgeting, therefore affordable and consistent passenger and vehicle fares across air and ferry networks are key.

At present the Comhairle Early Years service is meeting the current demand for early years provision, however there is potential for the demand to outstrip the supply. There was also a [legislative change](#) regarding deferred entry to Primary 1 which will likely increase demand, and the number of hours available to parents has increased over the past year, however the budget to increase staffing has not. There are some additional recruitment challenges for some geographical locations and for Gaelic-speaking staff. The service is working to address this through recruitment fairs, engagement with school leavers and promotion of the Childcare Foundation Apprenticeship pathway.

Transport Solutions

“Communities will have access to a range of innovative transport solutions which can reduce social isolation and provide improved access to services” – LOIP

In recognition of the transport need of the Western Isles, the [Outer Hebrides Active Travel Strategy 2021-2025](#) was developed to achieve the vision, priorities and outcomes for active travel within the Western Isles. The Active Travel Strategy aims to increase the use of our own body energy, such as walking or cycling for everyday functional reasons such as going to work, school or the shops. An additional [Stornoway Active Travel Masterplan](#) delivery plan was produced in November 2023 to identify a series of actions to support the essential transition to low carbon transport including: High quality active travel infrastructure, Supporting active neighbourhoods, Create a regional mobility hub, and, Implement a behavioural change campaign.

Building on the Fair Fares Review the Islands Connectivity Plan states that there will be detailed consideration of proposals to provide free foot passenger travel on inter-island ferries for under 22-year-old island residents within the Outer Hebrides, and to extend the existing National Ferry Concessionary Scheme to under-22-year old island residents. Transport Scotland have recently announced the extension of free travel vouchers (two return trips per year) for young islanders to under 22s. Also, their Aviation Statement includes as an outcome by 2025: review the Highlands and Islands Air Discount Scheme, to consider how it could be made fairer and more effective, and to ensure it is providing value for money.

HITRANS have advocated for the extension of the under-22s Concessionary Travel Scheme to passengers on ferry and air services where these are the main or only mode of public transport in an area. Air services are included because they provide rapid access to areas with a larger range of services and activities. They also provide day trip opportunities from some islands where these are not possible by ferry.

The case for free ferry passenger fares (and free air travel from some islands) for residents aged under 22 years is that it would:

- Treat island residents equitably - i.e. on a par with their peers elsewhere in Scotland.
- Enhance access to employment, education, services and leisure activities.
- Help support demand for ferry and air services.

There is a lack of equity in the current system for free bus fares for those aged under 22. These numbers reflect the low population density and public transport frequency in the HITRANS areas.

Consequently, our region’s young people derive a proportionally lower benefit from national policies and funding streams. This puts them at a disadvantage compared to young people elsewhere. It would be useful to understand how much it would cost to address the inequity created by excluding young islanders from travelling on their primary and first mode of passenger transport and how that would compare with the £15 million of support currently provided to Under 22s in the City of Edinburgh to support their access to their primary passenger transport (local bus) service.

Local Authority Area	Uptake of Cards Among Estimated Population Eligible	Average Trips per Cardholder per Annum	£ per young person living in the area
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	48%	46	£42
Orkney	51%	49	£47
Highland	47%	67	£60
Argyll & Bute	56%	70	£74
Glasgow	67%	124	£158
City of Edinburgh	93%	201	£356
Scotland average (mean)	68%	107	£139

Source: Scottish Government: Free bus pass scheme costs and uptake: FOI release. Covers 31 January 2022 to 3 February 2023

A range of factors account for the numbers of young people living in the islands. HIE’s research with people aged between 15 and 30 years has shown the importance of transport in affecting the attractiveness of the Highlands and Islands.

The attractiveness of the islands will affect young people’s decision whether to continue to live there. Transport costs are part of that decision making process. Failing to address fare costs for young people will make the islands less attractive compared to mainland areas. That is in a context where many islands have a declining population, including among young people. The Western Isles suffers from the [highest Transport Poverty in Scotland](#).

Childcare

“Support the expansion of access to childcare to enable parents to access employment, training and education in all geographies of the islands” - LOIP

Identified within the LOIP were actions to increase the number of available early learning and childcare places and the quality of childcare provision, alongside increasing the workforce within early learning and childcare services. It is believed that by supporting parents to access childcare and by increasing the local workforce that this could increase household income and therefore decrease the percentage of children living in household poverty. Working more hours simply isn't an option for many families due to the lack of childcare available across the Western Isles. In Barra, there are no registered childminders.

The Comhairle has invested significantly in infrastructure, staffing, training and resources to build capacity for manage the expansion of entitlement to provision of childcare to 1140 hours per year of funded provision. The current Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) provision across the Western Isles consists of:

- 19 Comhairle-operated ELCs – situated within schools and offering combinations of Gaelic and English provisions in different locations.
- Two partner nursery providers operated by private or community entities.
- One partner childminder service operating in conjunction with the Comhairle.
- Eight childminder services operating on a private commercial basis.

Of the 19 Comhairle-operated settings, just four are at maximum capacity. Spaces were available at the two partner nurseries. One of the primary challenges in expanding the ELC provision is due to the difficulties in recruitment of staff with relevant qualifications and Gaelic speakers with enough fluency to work in the Gaelic Medium Education settings. In response to this, work is being undertaken with the Accredited Skills and Training team and secondary schools to offer a Foundation Apprenticeship pathway which is promoted within the schools. The Early Years team are directly supporting unqualified staff to undertake SVQs while in-post and to build capacity for future promotion.

As part of the Scottish Government's Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP), £60,000 of grant funding is being used support the development of a new outdoor childcare venture, training opportunities with childcare, and promotion of the islands to attract people to relocate to Uist. Childcare is a major issue in Uist, with currently only 1 registered childminder covering the whole area. This therefore impacts upon the parents/carers ability to return to work or learn new skills. A refreshed Uist Repopulation Zone Action Plan is currently in progress; it is an active partnership plan and therefore regularly updated to reflect current and future needs. The plan focusses on long- and short-term projects and developments around infrastructure, Skills, Job, Housing and Gaelic.

4. COSTS OF LIVING

The Western Isles is one of the worst affected areas in Scotland for the cost of living, with elevated prices seen across food, housing, fuel, transport, and other essentials such as clothing or household goods compared to mainland Scotland. Furthermore, there are areas of the Western Isles which see greater increases in costs than others, such as Uist and Barra where a substantial impact on costs is observed. Families in Uist and Barra pay approximately 28% more on the same food shop as would be paid on the mainland, with prices impacted by transport costs, lack of available alternative supermarkets for competitive pricing, and ferry disruption. NHS and Comhairle staff are eligible to receive the Scottish Distant Islands Allowance which receives an annual increase, and is designed to support the recruitment and retention of staff within our island areas. The Scottish Government's Theory of Change suggests that the impact of the Cost of Living Crisis can be mitigated by minimizing housing costs, other living costs (such as food, energy etc.), and unmanageable levels of debt for low-income families by increasing their access to affordable credit. The number of loans approved by HI-Scot Credit Union for the Western Isles has increased from 111 in 22/23 to 137 in 23/24, at values of £589,975 and £846,113 representing an increase of 24% in approved loans, and 44% in overall area allocation. Declined loans for 22/23 totalled £182,344 (35 in number) and in 23/24 £159,276 (29 in number).

Scottish Distant Islands Allowance rates

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Annual rate	£1,043	£1,074	£1,117	£1,201	£1,279
% increase	2.8%	2.95%	4%	7.5%	6.5%

Minimum Income Guarantee implications

The work around the level of the Minimum Income Guarantee has been underpinned by the Minimum Income Standard. However, since 2013 Loughborough University have carried out research on what the Minimum Income Standard would be in remote rural Scotland, the [Cost of Remoteness](#) was published in 2021 and provides a comprehensive commentary on the differences in costs between urban UK and remote rural mainland and island areas in Scotland. The most recent figures were updated in a [2022 report](#) reflect the impact on inflation, updated costings and new urban UK research on remote rural Scotland minimum budgets.

More targeted Minimum Income Guarantee premiums would have to consider differences by household types and the type of support provided for rural areas to establish the remoteness premium for that specific good, and the percentage of that good taken up by the budget of that household type. Breakdowns of each of these uplifts for different household types are available in recent research as shown in the table below.¹ It may be the case that it is more cost effective to specifically alter a Minimum Income Guarantee to target fuel poverty or transport in remote households of certain types, due to the higher need for these goods

¹ [The Cost of Remoteness: Reflecting higher living costs in remote rural Scotland when measuring fuel poverty \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

in remote areas resulting in a larger share of remote household expenditure. In effect, a simple island and rural premium on top of the Minimum Income Guarantee would need to be an uplift of 14% at its least generous level of implementation, as this is the low end of the range for the established remoteness premium.

	Mainland	Island
Couple with two children	15.0%	14.1%
Family with children, rounded uplift (based on couple with two children)	15%	14%
Single working-age adult	26.7%	30.7%
Couple working-age adult	28.3%	32.6%
Working-age rounded uplift (based on average of single and couple)	27%	32%
Single pensioner	26.2%	25.7%
Couple pensioner	18.8%	24.4%
Pensioner rounded uplift (based on average of single and couple)	22%	25%

Source: Summary of Uplifts 2022, Loughborough University

Independent Living for Young People

“Promote independent living for young people transitions” - LOIP

The Western Isles Housing Support Service aims to provide accessible, flexible and person-centered housing support services to young people aged 16-19 in the Western Isles in critical need or as part of a transition plan, to enable them to secure, establish and/or maintain occupancy of appropriate accommodation. Young people will typically have a support plan, and the service will take a holistic view to their needs. The aim of the service is to:

- Prevent youth homelessness,
- Prepare young people for independent living and help them maintain their housing independence,
- Assist and support young people secure suitable, affordable, sustainable permanent accommodation, by providing high quality temporary accommodation to support this transition,
- To support the health, wellbeing and social integration of homeless young people.

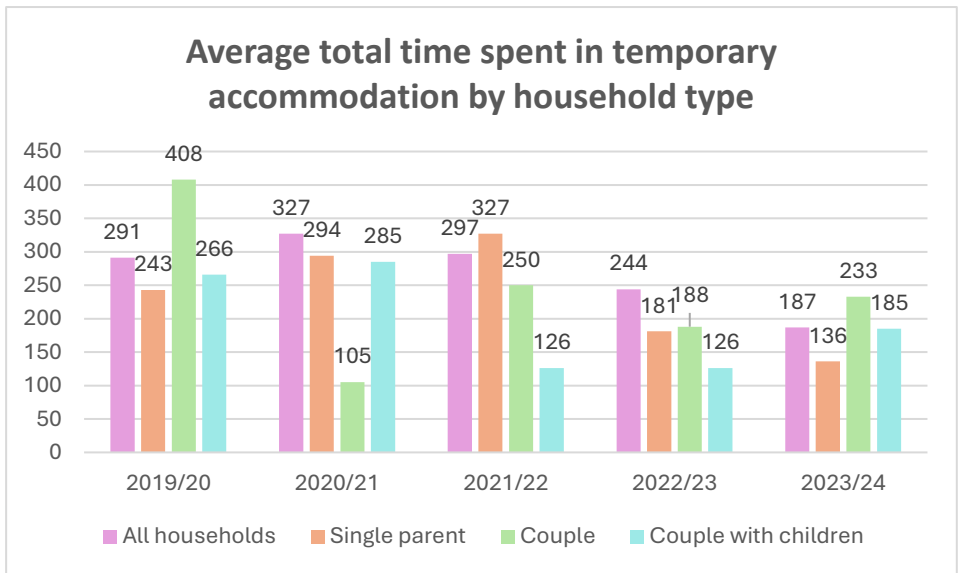
In the past year, accommodation has been developed at Keith Street in Stornoway to provide three rooms in the downstairs area of the property. The upstairs of the property has two – two-bedroom flats which are in the process of development for the use of young people.

Keith Street house will operate in a step up / step down model, enabling reduced levels of support for young people as they are ready to support their independence.

Affordable and Available Housing

“There is housing across the islands which meets the needs of all of our people and is affordable to them to heat and maintain over the life of their home” – LOIP

Hebridean Housing Partnership (HHP) reported that although rent arrears remained stable in 2023/34, they continued to see an increasing number of welfare concerns relating to the ongoing cost of living pressures, heating their homes and feeding their families. There were challenges reported in accessing support and health services, and mental health of residents and addiction were in some cases a barrier. HHP housed 77 statutory homeless applicants over the 2023/24 period. 57 new houses were completed over the previous year in Barra, Stornoway and Uig, and a further 80 homes are under construction. HHP continues to work with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES) and local housebuilders to increase the housing stock each year in the Western Isles, however the waiting lists for housing have significantly increased over the past 2-3 years; the reasons why are unclear at present.



Source: CnES Homeless Service

The CnES Homeless Service has strong partnership working throughout the OHCPP and the long term planning is showing significant decreases in the average total time spent in temporary accommodation by various household types since 2019. Furthermore, since 2019 there has been a decrease in the number of households with children or pregnant women in temporary accommodation and the number of children in temporary accommodation. These statistics are reported to the nearest 5 for disclosure control purposes, and is a positive change reflecting the ongoing partnership work. These Key Performance Indicators are being measured as part of the [CNES Corporate Strategy 2022-27](#) Strategic Priority to support resilient communities and quality of life with the Strategic Outcome of: *“Reduce inequality and poverty and promote social mobility”*.

Fuel Poverty

“Decrease the percentage of families in fuel poverty and increase energy efficiency measures” - LOIP

For the year 2023/24, Tighean Innse Gall (TIG) reported that fuel Poverty stands at 82%, the highest in Scotland, both housing costs and the cost of living are higher than elsewhere in the UK. The challenge is significant, and it has been known to both the Scottish and UK Governments for years. Homes in the Western Isles are challenged further with housing and fuel poverty due to 57% of homes being built before 1975, and a further 21% were constructed between 1976 to 1991 making them more challenging to insulate. Furthermore, 75% of homes are detached, meaning that all external walls are exposed to harsh weather conditions, particularly challenging to retain heat through winter weather. There is a high reliance on oil central heating and electric heating as renewable heating is unsuitable for the housing stock, and this has resulted in many households being affected by the recent energy price increases.

48% of respondents to the TIG survey have oil central heating with a further 31% using electric heating. This evidences the high reliance on oil central heating, which is still required due to the unsuitability of Western Isles housing stock for current renewable technologies. Concerning findings from the response shows that 67% of electric heated households are in fuel poverty, with 56% of electric heated homes in extreme fuel poverty. Oil central heating is lower at 52% in fuel poverty and 40% in extreme fuel poverty.

TIG carried out an ‘Affordable Warmth at Home in the Western Isles’ report, and their findings indicated that the Western Isles faces the highest levels of fuel poverty in Scotland. The Report emphasized the ongoing challenges faced by many households in their quest to sustain warmth, amid rising energy costs.

- Over 80% of homes are spending more than 10% of their income on heating
- Over 50% of homes are spending more than 20% of their income on heating

“Did you feel your house was warm enough last Winter?”

44% - not sufficiently warm

32% - reduced or turned off their heating

22% - somewhat satisfied

2% - yes

Energy Bills and Energy Efficiency

There are several challenges for rural and island communities which result in significantly higher energy prices, and increased exposure to energy shocks including: reduced options for alternative energy sources, harsher climate, and a high percentage of older houses with poor insulation and energy efficiency. In recognising these challenges, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar produced a [Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy 2024-2029](#) in November 2023 to set out a long term plan for decarbonising heat and improving the energy efficiency of homes and buildings across the Western Isles.

From 2020 – 2022, energy bills were increasing for all following the COVID-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine however, from 2023 Q1 – 2024 Q1, the average price of heating oil decreased from £816.20 per 1000 litres to £710.93 representing a 12.9% decrease in costs.

Through energy efficient investment works, HHP look to reduce child fuel poverty by making homes as energy efficient as possible to reduce running costs and maximise family incomes. In 2023, HHP were again successful in securing funding from Scottish Government to install renewable heating systems. £950k of funding was matched in full by HHP to install 126 air source heat pumps which primarily replaced infrared heating systems. HHP now has heat pumps in over 70% of their off-gas properties which has put them well on course to deliver on Scottish Governments net zero targets ahead of time. HHP also concluded their External Wall Insulation (EWI) programme for off-gas Swedish Timber homes. £330k of funding was matched by HHP to deliver EWI to 23 houses in a 2-year programme of works from Ness to Vatersay.

Muirneag Consulting Ltd on behalf of Point and Sandwick Trust developed a mechanism to assess the household income and energy efficiency status along with the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) to determine the families and household's fuel poverty status. Households are assessed to determine the depth of fuel poverty (against revised Scottish Definition) and the fuel poverty gap which exists (i.e. Effectively the amount of money required, or amount bills need to drop by to raise the household out of fuel poverty). There has been a significant financial and practical benefit to the households that were assessed. These assessments have also helped demonstrate the financial disparity between Island and mainland families to better inform policy, develop the local poverty action plan and improve its implementation. The cut off levels for grant assistance are net household income of £35,500 and savings above £28,000. Below these figures, people will potentially be eligible depending on their Fuel Poverty level and health condition. There are some exceptions for very serious health conditions (e.g. terminal cancer) where even above the caps, some funds can still be granted. Muirneag distributed the grant assistance in 2023/24 to those who need it within the Point and Sandwick area of the Isle of Lewis.

As part of the work in determining fuel poverty levels, Muirneag determine the fuel poverty levels and depth for households and utilise a sliding scale of financial support, giving more to those with greater need. For depth of fuel poverty, an assessment is made of the % of income being utilised against the modelled expenditure to give an indication of the burden placed on households with families.

Households with Children	No. homes Funded	No. homes Seen	Total No of children
No. of households seen/funded 5-15yrs	4	4	5
No. of households seen/funded under 5yrs	25	29	38
No. of households seen/funded under 1yr	0	1	1
TOTAL	29	34	44

Depth of FP for no of households seen 5-15yrs	19.8%
Depth of FP for no of households seen under 5yrs	19.1%
Depth of FP for no of households seen under 1yr	9.0%
Depth of FP Average for all homes with children	18.9%

Food Insecurity

The cost of living remains a pressing concern with many families who are experiencing poverty, and this often corresponds with food insecurity or food poverty. It is believed that one in six (17%) of people in Scotland have experienced food insecurity over the past twelve-month period (Trussell Trust). Over the reporting period, the Western Isles has seen several new initiatives pop up to support the community with their immediate needs including:

- ‘Soup and Blether’ by Third Sector Hebrides (TSH) – providing a warm space and hot meal for anyone who needs it
- The Education Development Center (EDC) Baby Bank
- The Cycle Library initiative by TSH – providing bicycles for children who need it, who return and swap these as they grow out of them
- The Superfoods Barra Children’s Centre Community Larder

The Health Visiting team have regular contact with families who have young children and babies and have noticed that the Cost of Living crisis is continuing, with families still requiring weekly food bank parcels, mostly on the west side of the island. These families have no car and find buses difficult to negotiate with small children. Some families find it difficult to ask for help but will agree to parcels when asked – these families are not those you would expect to have money worries. At Christmas time, 40 families received foodbank parcels via Health Visitors.

The Educational Attainment Team are currently supporting 13 families with monthly deliveries of food parcels, which has decreased from the highest number of 35 families over the past 12 months. This decrease is due to families gaining employment opportunities and finding themselves able to manage. Ad hoc food parcels are handed out for an immediate crisis, however families are encouraged to collect food bank parcels as they require. Referrals for support come from schools, early years, health visiting teams and social work.

The Cearn Community Fridge launched in 2022 from the Cearn Taigh Ceilidh in Steornabagh a Tuath – the ward area which currently has the highest percentage of children in relative poverty and the second highest percentage of children in absolute poverty in the Western Isles. The community fridge supports families by providing a warm, safe space hot meal, and fresh food supplies, and aims to stop good food going to waste while alleviating food insecurity. Between January – October 2023, 763 hot meals were served, 1 grow your own workshop was delivered, 640 food parcels distributed, and 5 cooking workshops have been delivered which incorporated the ‘Wonderbag’ initiative alongside ESOL. A ‘Grab and Go’ brunch club was also established so that young people have access to food through the school holidays, which can be a more difficult time for family financial pressures.

The Food Insecurity Pilot was delivered from 1st June 2023 to 30th November 2023. The pilot was delivered across 9 Local Authority areas – which included the Western Isles - and 11 Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB). The CAB issued shopping cards and cash grants to those experiencing severe hardship, alongside the offer of holistic advice. The objectives were to offer an immediate and dignified response to the individual’s crisis, while supporting them to resolve their issue in the long term. During the pilot, 527 cards or grants were provided, of which 380 were to adults and 147 were to children. The total financial gain for clients was £13,175 through this pilot plus an additional £3,249 spent in the extension period. The proportion of Western Isles repeat need was 48%.

Of all card and grant related gains 51% was distributed to priority family groups. From CAB feedback, the reasons for repeat need include: benefit waiting times, complexity of support provided and need, high cost of living (especially in rural areas) or an ongoing budget deficit.

5. ELIGIBILITY AND TAKE UP OF BENEFITS

Strengthening the package of benefits and financial support will help thousands of families in the Western Isles to meet their household costs, and to provide for their families with dignity and respect. Services are trying to reach vulnerable families to work to maximise their benefit entitlements, and many services and charities in the Western Isles are offering additional grants and supports to families who are in need. However, it is generally assumed that the maximization of benefits, or accessing one-off grants or white goods is unlikely to lift families out of poverty.

Department of Works and Pensions

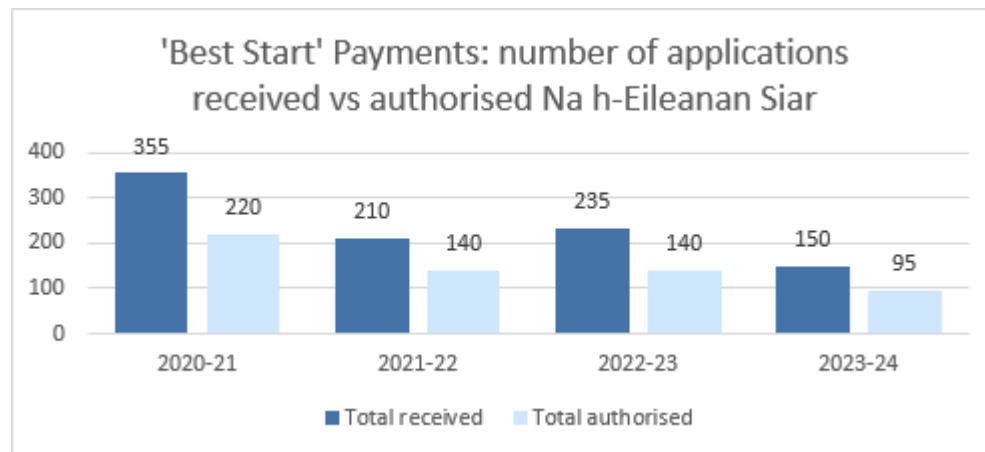
Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) report that there remain significant employment opportunities across the Outer Hebrides at present, and that anyone who wants to work, should be able to. There are less vacancies than in previous years but still significant employment opportunities. DWP Officers continued to signpost parents and carers to available entitlements. DWP are working with just over 400 people experiencing barriers to entering employment and this includes those with mental health and wellbeing issues. There are over 1000 individuals on Universal Credit. 365 families are currently in receipt of Universal Credit (UC), and do not require any additional supports. It was recognised that those on Universal Credit and in employment, and those in low paid jobs, but earning over

the threshold for additional supports, represented a significant risk of being in/entering poverty. These figures are subject to change as DWP are in the middle of the move to UC for Legacy Benefit customers. Individuals and families are expressing significant concerns in relation to increased energy and living costs.

Social Security Benefits

Social Security Scotland as an agency of the Scottish Government has responsibility for delivering social security payment and supporting people to receive benefits they are entitled to. There are many benefits which directly support families with children such as the Best Start Payments, or Scottish Child Payment, and there are benefits which may indirectly support children and young people, such as Carer Support Payment (if the child has a disability), Heating Benefit, or Job Start Payment which could help a parent back into employment. The Comhairle Financial Inclusion Service or the DWP can assist people to better understand and apply for their benefits.

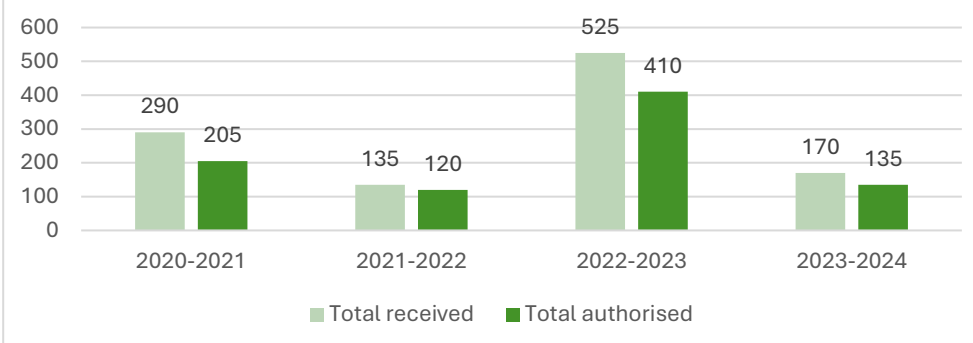
The Best Start Grant consists of three different benefit payments: Pregnancy and Baby Payment, Early Learning Payment and School Age Payment. Also available is Best Start Foods which is a payment to help buy healthy foods during pregnancy and while your child is under 3. Collectively, these four are known as the 'Best Start Payments'. Along with the Scottish Child Payment, there are five family payments available from Social Security Scotland and parents can apply for them all at the same time.



The Pregnancy and Baby Payment is a cash payment for parents and carers when they are expecting or have a new child. It is worth £753.65 for your first child and £377.35 for any subsequent children and is paid to help cover some of the costs of having children. The Early Learning Payment is a £314.45 payment to help support child development, for example travel costs, changes of clothes for messy play, trips out and toys for home learning. The amount is the same for any child you have. The School Age Payment is worth £314.45 to help with the costs of preparing for your child to attend school, such as school clothes, school trips, stationery for school etc., and you can receive the payment for multiple children. Scottish Child Payment was initially introduced for low-income families with children aged under six. The

payment was extended to eligible low-income families with children aged under 16 on 14 November 2022. It is intended to provide regular, additional financial support for families already in receipt of qualifying benefits to assist with the costs of caring for a child. After a surge in applications for the Scottish Child Payment in 2022/23, the number both received and authorised has settled back to similar rates from previous years.

Scottish Child Payment: number of applications received vs authorised Na h-Eileanan Siar



BSG/Foods payments from 10 December 2018 to 30 June 24 totalled £438,252 comprising £112,077 Pregnancy and Baby Payments, £100,980 Early Learning Payment, £99,549 School Age Payment, and £125,646, for Best Start Foods. 1375 applications were processed, and 870 authorized and 35 withdrawn.

Scottish Child Payments totalled 7170 issued to clients with a value of £1,289,580, which shows an increase from the 3840 issued at a value of £552,820 in 22/23. A main reason for the differences observed across these years is that the Scottish Child Payment was extended 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.

Financial Inclusion Team

The aim of the Financial Inclusion Service is to have a positive impact on the financial, mental, physical health and welfare of clients. With Covid-19 soon followed by the Cost of Living crisis, financial stress has increased greatly, which affects people in many ways.

The service uses a holistic approach when supporting clients. They consider whether they can improve client lives financially and what their wider concerns are. Not all benefits from interacting with the service can be quantified by monetary gain.

If it is found that there is anything additional which can help to improve the quality of client’s lives then the service will refer and liaise with other agencies on their behalf, as necessary. This could be for any number of things e.g. debt advice, training opportunities, Occupational Therapy for adaptations or equipment, a Blue Badge, a new heating system, even down to completing a form for their bins to be collected from their door rather than them trying to take them to the roadside.

Over the 2023/24 reporting period, the Financial Inclusion Service supported 130 households throughout the Western Isles. The Financial Inclusion Service have also attended community events with Early Years to share information about the service and developed leaflets and flyers with the aim of increasing the number of clients that they support.

In total, over the reporting period the Financial Inclusion Team were able to increase wealth to households in the Western Isles by £732,194.02.

Funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund of £100k was allocated towards the service.

Distribution of Vouchers, Grants and Other Support

The Scottish Welfare Fund is made up of two different grants: the Community Care Grant and the Crisis Grant.

Both can be applied for by someone over sixteen years and on a low income or receiving certain benefits.

	Number of Applications – Eilean Siar					
	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Community Care Grant	100	95	110	155	150	105
Crisis Grant	190	205	280	290	300	245

Both the Community Care Grant and the Crisis Grant have had a significant decrease in applications over the past year, however the applications to these funds remain higher than pre-covid.

From January until March 2024, all Community Care Grants were processed within 15 days and all Crisis Grants were processed on the same day they were requested.

62% (65) of Community Care Grant applications and 75% (185) of Crisis Grant applications resulted in an award in the last year totalling £99,180 and £18,821 respectively.

In Scotland, if you rent your home and you get [Housing Benefit](#) or [Universal Credit](#), but still can't afford your housing costs, you may be eligible for a Discretionary Housing Payment.

The Discretionary Housing Payment awarded totalled £251,348 where the average award value was £739, and the award rate 100%.

The Learning Shop (ESOL)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delivered a free “Cooking on a Budget” session, free sewing classes and the ‘Wonderbag’ pilot. Provision of a food bank and free period products.
Educational Attainment Apprentice Team,	<p>Provision of regular funding through the CECYP Grant which has been used for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cadet uniform and camp equipment Support payment of Theory test exam Holiday activities provided for young people with care experience – bowling/lunch Funding for CE group run in collaboration with partners from social work and WhoCares? Scotland Supporting a young person that was made homeless – to purchase food
Hebridean Housing Partnership (HHP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distributed £40,000 of cash vouchers with a value of £100 to tenants who are struggling, Distribution of 400 warm packs (e.g. Oodies, thermal wear, and flasks), 150 microwaves, 100 slow cookers and over 100 airfryers.
Tighean Innse Gall (TIG) / The Energy Advisory Service (TEAS)	<p>34 households with families were supported by the voucher scheme of which, 21 of these families were in receipt of benefits and 22 of the households were single-parent homes. Furthermore, of these 34 households, 7 homes received £150 vouchers towards coal, 13 received £147 Credit vouchers for electric and 14 received £147 prepayment vouchers towards electric.</p>
Western Isles Cancer Care Initiative (WICCI)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ‘Social Fund’ providing £500 to people with a cancer diagnosis, or up to £1000 if there is a family involved or the applicant is moving from paid employment onto benefits/sick leave, Provision of complementary therapies and counselling services free of charge.
Action for Children (AFC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distribution of food vouchers to families (number of families and total amounts) 30 families totalling £2680 Distribution of fuel vouchers or electric top-ups to families (number of families and total amounts) 6 families totalling £600 Turner and Townsend grants for school uniforms and school equipment: 8 families totalling £650 Distribution of vouchers for/purchasing of white goods 6 families totalling £1368 Donation of Christmas toys in 2023 Callanish Ltd, BT Openreach, UHI, Riley's Toy Shop, Co-Op, Original Factory Shop, Local Individual Donations

The Comhairle nan Eilean Siar Education and Children’s Services department reported a decline in applications during 2023/24 for Free School Meals since the roll out of Universal Free School Meals to P1 – P5.

- Free School Meals and Clothing Grant – **154 families**
- Clothing Grant only – **89 families**
- Education Maintenance Award – **35 pupils**

The Clothing Grant is awarded as £120 for a primary pupil and £150 for a secondary pupil. Additionally, most schools in the Western Isles have implemented a Pre-loved Uniform Scheme enabling parents to obtain uniform for their children with an optional donation. Parents can request specific items of uniform discreetly via email. Training has also been provided in regards to Poverty Proofing through the [Cost of the School Day Toolkit](#) which considers the barriers costs create within education and how to tackle these.

6. WHAT ELSE HAS BEEN DONE?

Get Heard Hebrides

Get Heard Scotland was a national campaign to ensure lived experience of poverty is captured and represented in planning and strategy, and although this came to an end, this was continued locally by NHS Western Isles as Get Heard Hebrides (GHH). The focus of the project remained the same as the previous year, to identify issues affecting individuals and groups within the communities

During the reporting period 2023/24, a total of **48 people** were interviewed regarding issues they felt were important to them, which was less than the previous year. Most of the interviewing took place in the Cearns Tigh Ceilidh, the Cearns Resource Centre and a large number were also conducted over the telephone. Participants came from several communities throughout Lewis and Harris.

Harris area: 8 individuals in total; all female.

Issues identified were:

- The continuing rise in the cost of foodstuffs,
- Rising energy prices and the fear of coping during the winter months.
- Ferry disruptions were again highlighted, and concern raised as to how they would operate over the winter.
- Litter left by tourists.

Lewis area: 40 people in total; 26 female and 14 men.

There were similar issues identified in Lewis with a great deal of concern about the approaching Winter weather and their ability to pay their energy bills. The significant rise in prices in Tesco and the Co-op were again highlighted:

“I worry constantly about how I’m going to afford things! I try not to take the kids with me shopping in case they ask for something and I don’t have enough money. I feel bad but I just can’t afford any luxuries” – female, single mother of 3.

“I use the local shop as they give me credit and I will pay what I owe when I get my benefits. It’s handy but I always seem to be owing money!” – unemployed single male, aged 56.

To continue supporting the GHH campaign, a short video was put together giving details of the project. This platform will allow people in Uist and Barra to participate and give them the option of answering the questions online or request further information regarding the questions. It will allow projects to facilitate discussion with their groups.

Place Standard

Over the winter months the GHH work was interrupted to allow for Place Standard workshops to be held throughout the Western Isles. However, a question relating to the cost of living crisis was added to the existing categories with a view to establishing participants' understanding of the issues.

Although the main target groups came from P6 and P7 school pupils, community groups were also included. The collation of the data has yet to be finalised, but it was apparent that all ages were aware of the present crisis and highlighted similar concerns to the information already gathered from the GHH programme:

“The shop prices are just increasing all the time making shopping very difficult.”

“Prices have gone up everywhere and it is frightening.”

“The shop is so handy especially for people who need credit as they can get shopping and pay for it when they get paid.”

The problem of cold houses and the cost of heating bills was highlighted, and that there could be smaller housing for individuals living alone.

Some have experienced problems with anti-social behaviour which makes them feel unsafe.

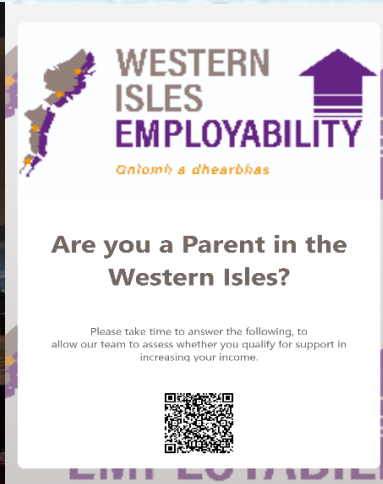
Also highlighted was that there is a huge gap in availability of facilities and a need for more activities targeted towards children and weekly groups for pensioners. Young adults need more places to go other than to the pub, and improved public transport (buses) rather than parents transporting children to activities.

Also suggested was provision of music classes with funding made available to cover costs, as not everyone can afford these, and classes for children that aren't interested in outdoor activities, such as art classes.

There were suggestions that the activities be made available free for children and young adults with free transport to evening classes, organised groups to give parents 'me time', and more ceilidhs for families to attend together.

Child and Family Events

In 2023, the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar Early Years Family Support Team staged their first Family and Child event in Stornoway Town Hall on Tuesday 14th November 2023 to bring together as many services as possible who offer support to families of young children. The event showcased options for accessing support including parenting, financial support, employability and health and wellbeing.



Bookbug sessions were delivered throughout the event which support relationship building within families. The event offered light snacks and refreshments, and free transport to any families who wished to attend where transport may have been a barrier. The event was a huge success and there are plans to repeat this in 2024.

Challenge Poverty Week 2023

[Challenge Poverty Week](#) is an annual event coordinated by The Poverty Alliance which ran in 2023 from Monday 2nd – Sunday 8th October 2023.



A public information campaign took place during Challenge Poverty Week, comprising daily media releases and the promotion of locally developed material on the themes of families and children; money worries; energy advice; employer advice; and food. Daily themes were in place to tailor support and information around:

Monday 2nd – Communities and volunteers

Tuesday 3rd – Housing

Wednesday 4th – Adequate incomes

Thursday 5th Transport

Friday 6th – Food

Saturday 7th and Sunday 8th – Reflection

Priority Areas for Future Planning

The enshrinement of the UNCRC into Scots Law and delivering Rights-Based services

The centralisation of resources e.g. how can we better inform families of the supports available to them digitally and avoid unnecessary duplication of services

How we record information relating to the six priority groups to better inform future reporting

Connecting SEEMiS information to ward area/data zone to inform a child poverty index

Continue to address child poverty through the OHCPP Anti Poverty Strategic Group, the OHCPP Anti Poverty Sub-Group, and Child Poverty Working Group

An all-island campaign to persuade people to apply for benefits with maximum publicity

Improve data literacy around poverty

Continue OHCPP efforts around poverty mitigation including fuel poverty through both governments, and transport poverty