



Includem Consultation: Health and wellbeing of Children and Young People

What are the key issues around health and wellbeing for children and young people in Scotland?

Child poverty is the key driver to interlinking issues of the health and wellbeing of children and young people in Scotland. The consequences of poverty in the home and in communities are considerable, with impacts across mental and physical health, development, and the ability to engage in education.

Child poverty has lifelong negative consequences on health and wellbeing,¹ and forms a barrier to accessing human rights including healthy food, a safe living environment and education.² The Inspiring Children's Futures Learning Report Series (2021) highlights the imperative of economic and social wellbeing, coupled with justice for children, young people and families to ensure the prevention of further injustice and entrenched challenges. Children and young people cannot be expected to maintain their health and wellbeing and achieve their full potential in a society that accepts low-income families and communities having to struggle daily to meet their basic needs.

This struggle impacts the long-term health and wellbeing of children and young people in Scotland at multiple levels – including their physical and mental health, emotional development, education & learning, and relationships.

Poverty both triggers and maintains poor health and wellbeing outcomes and vice versa. There is a strong link between experiences of poverty and poor mental & physical health and wellbeing – predominantly caused by persistent levels of emotional distress.³ This results in dramatic disparities. For example, North Ayrshire has high deprivation rates – with 23.8% of children in low-income families, compared to 16.5% across Scotland. This area performs worse than the rest of Scotland on a range of health indicators and illustrates the dramatic differences between high- and low-income residents in local areas. In Kilwinning, between wealthy private estates and council estates that are within a walking distance of each other, the life expectancy drops by 21 years.⁴ Additionally, children and young people who live in families with single parents; a family member with a disability; from Black, Asian or Ethnic Minority backgrounds; with experiences of domestic violence and substance misuse are more likely to experience poverty and destitution.⁵ This

¹ Kane and Bibby (2018); Ross, Shortt and Woodhouse, A, (2020); McGarvey (2017)

² set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

³ Marshall Lee et al (2021); Mowat (2021); Ratterman et al (2021)

⁴ [The Guardian \(2018\)](#)

⁵ Fitzpatrick et al (2020)



illustrates the intersectionality of the challenges with poverty and experiences of social stigma and wider health inequalities.

Within the first few years of life, family income already determines a child's development. while there is no difference at birth in a baby's brain, by the age of two, there is already a wide gap in the development of the areas that control language skills, ability to concentrate and exert self-control. The biggest predictor of this impact is family income,⁶ suggesting that a family's low income has a significant impact during early years development. While further study is required, a number of poverty related causes could impact this - including poor levels of nutrition, an increase in parental stress leading to less responsive and punitive parenting, increased exposure to adverse childhood experiences, or high stress levels in the children and young people themselves.⁷

This impact carries on and forms a widening gap between the most and least disadvantaged children in their ability to achieve positive outcomes. Data on the attainment gap shows that by age three, there is already a gap in vocabulary and problem solving. This gap persists and widens as children and young people progress through the education system,⁸ resulting in significant disparities between grades attained and the destinations achieved at leaving school.⁹

Poverty forms a hidden barrier to school attendance, impacting self-esteem, reinforcing stigma and limiting learning opportunities. The Child Poverty Action Group found during the Cost of the School Day project that poverty limits children and young people's ability to engage in a range of educational opportunities¹⁰ – including school trips, some subject choices at secondary school and extra curricular activities.¹¹ Rates of exclusion are significantly higher in Scotland's most deprived areas (bottom 20% SIMD – at 35.4 per 1000 pupils) compared to least deprived areas (top 20% of SIMD – at 8.2 per 1000 pupils).¹² In order to improve attainment, further explorations is required into the use of restorative practices to improve school relationships and reduce rates of school exclusion.¹³ When children and young people were asked about their experiences, the ineffectiveness of exclusion in comparison to building relationships was clear:

"[I] didn't care about being suspended. But it de-motivates me from going back to school when I do stop being suspended."

⁶ TED, Salon (2019)

⁷ Naven et al (2019); Mowat (2019) and Marshall Lee et al (2021)

⁸ Sosu and Ellis (2021); Robertson and McHardy (2021); McEnaney (2021)

⁹ McEnaney (2021); Sosu and Ellis (2021)

¹⁰ CPAG and DCC (2018)

¹¹ Naven et al (2019)

¹² [School exclusion statistics](#) (Scottish government)

¹³ McCluskey (2017); [The School Experience \(2021\)](#)



“I’ve got a really good relationship with a teacher... She always listened to me. I could just walk into the support base and she’d ask if I was okay and sit me down and listen to me. And that’s just what I needed....”¹⁴

Additionally, there is a recognised intersectionality between poverty, additional support needs (ASN) and being a looked after child (LAC).¹⁵ Of the 77,450 Scottish school pupils who fall within the lowest decile of the SIMD in 2016, around one third also have ASN and/or are LAC.¹⁶ They are more likely to be informally or formally excluded from school or be placed on part-time timetable because of their needs. Children and young people who experience exclusion or reduced timetables report that they don’t receive support to make up the learning they miss.¹⁷ Notably, the attainment of those with ASN and LAC is significantly below their peers,¹⁸ and LAC children and young people are particularly at risk of developing mental health problems.¹⁹

Despite the commitment in the Included, Engaged and Involved policy,²⁰ there is a current policy disconnect between the inclusion agenda and closing the attainment gap.²¹ Absenteeism, the cost of the school day and exclusions all contribute to more lost time in the classroom for those experiencing poverty.

While a lack of aspiration is often blamed as to why children and young people from poor communities do less well in grading and attainment, this is short sighted. All children and young people are capable of hopes and dreams. It is more likely that their high aspirations are not supported at home or at school in comparison to those from wealthier families.²² In school, this cuts across a number of issues, for example from a centrally delivered curriculum in literacy with limited relatable content;²³ a school system that results in poor students ascribing gaps in their learning to an inherent failing within themselves;²⁴ and teachers’ behaviours and view of a child’s ability being influenced by their level of disadvantage²⁵ – with a number of other factors creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that assumes no aspirations.

¹⁴ [The School Experience \(2021\)](#)

¹⁵ Sosu and Ellis (2014); Mowat (2019)

¹⁶ Scottish Government (2017g)

¹⁷ [The School Experience \(2021\)](#) ; Children in Scotland (2018) and Mowat (2019)

¹⁸ Scottish Government (2018a, 2018f)

¹⁹ Scottish Government (2017c)

²⁰ Ex. Part 2: Preventing and Managing Exclusion policy (Scottish Government, 2017b)

²¹ Mowat (2019)

²² McCluskey (2017)

²³ Ellis and Rowe (2020)

²⁴ Goudeau and Cimpian (2021)

²⁵ Naven et al (2019)



“One time in Primary, the teachers told me I was going to jail when I was older – teacher said that in front of the whole class.”²⁶

When we asked children and young people who experienced poverty and lower attainment what would improve school and learning for them, it wasn't about curriculum and learning, it was about relationships. They made clear emphasis on:

- Being supported, understood and listened to.
“I need you to make adjustments for my learning style because it's not something I can change.”
- A learning environment that ensured their rights are respected and upheld.
“Decisions are being made without my insight”
- A culture of mutual respect and relationships which supported their aspirations and overcame their challenges.
“Give me a chance to start again.”
- The need for a trauma informed approach to understand the distress they may be experiencing on a daily basis or adverse experiences in their childhood.
“They need to know the way your mind and body reacts to certain things – fight or flight... need to know how you're going to react, or if some things have happened in your past that might trigger you...”²⁷

Poverty within the home

Poverty within the home and its impact on family wellbeing has major implications for children and young people. According to research we conducted in 2020 on the impact of the pandemic involving 126 young people and their families, more than half reported a daily struggle to pay for food, heating, other bills, transport, and the internet.²⁸ Similarly in research conducted in 2021 on families' experiences of poverty and services, half reported their situation as being a daily struggle and a constant source of stress, with others 'just managing'. 'Big things', such as paying for school clothing or new footwear as children grew was seen as almost unmanageable.

“I could have cried when I couldn't get access to the uniforms...I think they should look at how much people are actually earning and give more access to the uniforms and free school meals.”

Parents and carers reported making sacrifices to ensure their children didn't have to go without, with one parent speaking about only eating one meal a day so their children could have all three.

²⁶ [The School Experience \(2021\)](#)

²⁷ [The School Experience \(2021\)](#)

²⁸ [Voices report \(2021\)](#)



“I sometimes struggle but I just get on with it...My kids would never go without, I would, but not them. Sometimes I only eat one meal a day.”

On top of facing these daily difficulties to access necessities, children, young people and families confront other complex challenges – such as neurodiversity, trauma and domestic violence.

“My son has ADHD, Tourette’s and severe [learning difficulties] and his behaviour at home was getting to the point that I wasn’t able to manage. He was violent. I had no support during the first lockdown except bits from my family. He was smashing everything up, including his own TV and he left himself with nothing.”

“The whole house was ready to break in half – we all carry trauma – me through domestic violence and childhood trauma and the boys from their dad and then Ava’s dad – we were all hurting and hating...I don’t want my children to grow up and be victims like I was. I want them to be positive and head strong.... I have to break the cycle.”²⁹

Poverty in the home also has a direct impact on learning. Children and young people living in poverty report that their home environments, often characterised by overcrowding, lack space to learn, limited appropriate furniture and a lack of money for heat, all create barriers to concentration and home learning.³⁰ Many reported challenges – including with internet access and support needs - in home learning during school closures.

“We don’t have good wi-fi or signal”

“During online learning my teachers said I couldn’t do the work as I couldn’t finish tasks. The work was fine for me. I was just slow and they’d always start a new task at the next lesson so I didn’t have a chance to finish.”³¹

Additionally, due to their own poor health or the health of their parent/carer, those who experience poverty have higher rates of absenteeism from school.³² Food insecurity in households can cause difficulties in concentration in school, with teachers estimating that

children lose one hour of learning each day they arrive hungry.³³ If this happens once a week, this equates to 36 hours of learning a year.

Poverty within the community

²⁹ [Voices report \(2021\)](#)

³⁰ Naven et al, (2019); Barnardo’s Scotland (2018)

³¹ [The School Experience \(2021\)](#)

³² Rattermann et al (2021)

³³ [Glasgow Times \(2021\)](#)



Concentrated poverty in communities is linked to issues related to safety, poor funding of support services, access to green spaces, affordable child friendly activities and also transport. High rates of community violence, substance misuse and high crime rates can result in children and young people not accessing play and green spaces – which are recognised at increasing their skills in language, problem solving and imagination, affecting wellbeing and attainment.³⁴ While the importance of public spaces such as libraries is recognised,³⁵ these spaces are under the threat of government cuts – and are more likely to face closure in impoverished areas. These areas are also likely to have less extra-curricular activities and clubs, that could provide extra learning and social opportunities.³⁶ In our 2021 research, many families noted the cuts to services in their local area and wanted to see more accessible services and activities for children and young people locally to feel safer.

“I’d make sure there was something for all kids to do – there is nothing here – no clubs for them. And I’d put in more cameras and get some of the greenery cut back because it’s creepy at night. We need more cameras to stop muggings in this kind of area. There are a lot of lanes and side streets – open that up. When the dark nights come in you want to be safe.”³⁷

Access to quality of learning is considerably impacted by the catchment areas, resulting in concentration of pupils who experience poverty in neighbourhoods of persistent disadvantage influencing both school and local perceptions of the quality of education and level of attainment.³⁸ Schools in areas of high deprivation have less access to high quality learning resources and teachers tend to be less qualified or experienced.³⁹ This inequality became clear during the use of the algorithm for assessing grading during the pandemic, with pupils from impoverished schools more likely to have their marks downgraded.⁴⁰

More needs to be done to ensure children and young people’s health, wellbeing and ability to reach their potential is not a postcode lottery.

What are the current challenges with improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next 5 years?

The current approach to poverty has a number of challenges with improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next 5 years. Despite Scottish

³⁴ Ross, Shortt and Woodhouse, (2020)

³⁵ Naven et al (2019)

³⁶ Naven et al, (2019)

³⁷ [Voices report \(2021\)](#)

³⁸ Robertson and McHardy (2021)

³⁹ Rattermann et al (2021)

⁴⁰ McEnaney (2021)



Government's targets and agreed plans to reduce child poverty by 2030,⁴¹ rates continued to grow pre-pandemic, and were further exacerbated by the pandemic. The Scottish Government is set to miss the interim target of 18% in relative poverty by 2023.⁴² Additionally, there are significant implementation gaps and difficulties with the measurement of improvements in attainment, particularly in relation to wellbeing.⁴³

Not Heard

Currently, the development of policy and support services do not hear from those most impacted, resulting in mitigation that is not targeted effectively or at the right scale. While consultations and research often bring in those that are already engaged, economically disadvantaged families' experiences of stigma, feelings of shame and resulting distrust of services⁴⁴ leads to disengagement and underreporting. As a result, not only is the true scale of poverty unknown,⁴⁵ but those most impacted by current challenges to health and wellbeing are not heard from.

Not Where They Are

As a result, policy solutions do not reach those intended. For example, while the "*improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing*" is included in the National Improvement Framework,⁴⁶ there is a lack of conclusive evidence for how school-based interventions contribute to a reduction in health and wellbeing inequalities.⁴⁷ This is particularly visible in the narrow focus on the attainment gap and in-school solutions. As set out above, children and young people who experience poverty, particularly those most disadvantaged, have a considerably higher rate in absenteeism and barriers to learning. Measures taken by schools as a part of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) and Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) take place in a school setting, meaning those not in school, and most affected by poverty, benefit less from interventions. The 2021 OECD report noted that this approach will not be successful, and that wider structural and socio-economic factors such as welfare, health and housing need to be addressed to achieve

equity in education.⁴⁸ In a narrow focus on the attainment gap instead of the wider wellbeing gap resulting from poverty, we fail to address the underlying causes impacting

⁴¹ Scottish Parliament (2017); Scottish Government (2018)

⁴² Cebula et al (2021)

⁴³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report on the Scottish education system (July 2021) and James McEnaney's Class Rules (2021)

⁴⁴ [Voices report \(2021\)](#)

⁴⁵ Treanor (2020), Walker (2014)

⁴⁶ Scottish Government (2017a)

⁴⁷ Robertson and McHardy (2021)

⁴⁸ McEnaney (2021)



wellbeing that prevent children and young people's from being able to engage in their education and thrive.

Not According to Their Needs

This suggests a policy environment that focuses on the symptoms, rather than causes of health and wellbeing inequalities. Over a decade of austerity has resulted in cuts to statutory services, closure of community-based support, welfare reform and housing insecurity. The shift away from financing support services has had significant consequences – leading children, young people & families to experience poverty, destitution and more complex needs.⁴⁹ This type of preventative work that places value in connection and provides support where those that need it are located, is important to mediate against the effects of poverty.⁵⁰

According to our own research conducted in 2021, families face considerable barriers to accessing services and support – including gaps for young people with mental health issues, substance use or challenges with neurodiversity. There is a challenging level of complexity to accessing support, with help only arriving at crisis point. Many families reported not being believed when asking for help and struggling to get appointments with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Feeling judged, not being listened to and a lack of support were frequently cited concerns.⁵¹

“There are so many services offering a bit of this and that but nothing for kids on the spectrum with anger issues. You are trying to grapple with things and then you have far too many people involved. It is very exhausting...There were no mental health beds for someone their age, no drug residential services for those under 18. There are no service that deals with Asperger's, drug addiction and mental health issues.”

Policy interventions that seek to genuinely address the needs of families most impacted by structural inequality must consider the wider challenges they face and the need to bridge gaps between home & school.

“People have, like, stuff going in our lives. And then teachers don't really take that into consideration.” ⁵²

Not Measured

With the interventions that are undertaken, literature shows that there are gaps in what is measured, how it is measured and understanding what has the greatest impact for those most disadvantaged. ⁵³ There are a number of significant questions about the validity of

⁴⁹ Galloway (2020)

⁵⁰ Treanor (2020)

⁵¹ [Voices report \(2021\)](#)

⁵² [The School Experience \(2021\)](#)

⁵³ McEnaney (2021)



current measures of attainment, including the use of the Scottish index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) rather than levels of Free School Meals (FSM); the reliance on the Programme for International Student Assessment scores (PISA); and school leavers achieving one or more qualifications at a certain level – which can obscure the significant inequalities in the number of qualifications attained. In measuring success, there is a lack of transparency about how individual schools are using SEC or PEF funding or the impact they are having.⁵⁴ Those programmes that are known, are mostly universal rather than targeted.⁵⁵

Evaluations of programmes designed to address the poverty related attainment gap fail to demonstrate impact where it is needed most. While many interventions show some progress for those experiencing some level of disadvantage, the same programs can make things worse for those most disadvantaged.⁵⁶ In fact, statistics show a widening attainment gap, particularly evident at Level 4 literacy and numeracy statistics.⁵⁷

A Need for Ambition

While we welcome the government’s commitment to doubling the child payment, there is a need for greater ambition and leadership from government to proactively address inequalities that exists. Based on the Office of National Statistics population projections⁵⁸, in 2030 it is estimated that there will be 1 099 000 children and young people aged 19 and under. Even if the current child poverty plan succeeds, this leaves 55000 children experiencing absolute poverty in 2030. How is this respecting and promoting the rights of these children?

What offers the best opportunity for improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people over the next 5 years?

There are a number of opportunities to improve the effectiveness of policies and reach of support systems over the next 5 years.

Lived experience is key to developing effective solutions.

Any solutions need to include lived experience of those that are least heard in decision making. To understand and address gaps in health and wellbeing for those experiencing poverty, working with organisation based in communities like includem would help the committee, policy makers and service designers hear from children, young people and

⁵⁴ McEnaney (2021); Robertson and McHardy (2021)

⁵⁵ Barnardo’s (2018)

⁵⁶ Sosu and Ellis (2014); McEnaney (2021)

⁵⁷ Robertson and McHardy, (2021); McEnaney, (2021)

⁵⁸ [ONS, Population Projections](#)



families most impacted by structural inequalities to health and wellbeing and respond more effectively.⁵⁹

Building up early intervention services must come alongside mitigative intervention.

There is a need for a combination of early intervention and mitigative intervention over the next 5 years. As set out above, there are a number of poverty related factors that require early intervention to support children and young people’s health and wellbeing. While early intervention is critical to address these challenges, setting up these structures will take time. There is a need to recognise that some children and young people have fallen through the current gaps and are past the early intervention stage. Particularly for families already in entrenched poverty, services in this middle ground could help prevent further escalation – before families hit crisis point. The next five years will be critical to ensure that currently struggling children and young people do not become another lost generation. While gaps begin to be addressed, greater partnership working across agencies and services will be key to helping families navigate the current complexity of services.

“I would say I am more respectful and helpful and not fighting anymore. It is just by having people who are there to help me.”

“The includem staff explained about what they did – they helped him in different ways. He was on the hard shoulder of the motorway and he spoke to Eve – she has a way of speaking to him – there is trust there”

“She basically stopped him from going to jail. I think the intervention was done at the right time.”

Relationship-based practice and holistic support can help rebuild trust and identify support needs.

Relationship-based practice & working with the whole family (where and when they need it) could have a major impact on addressing the poverty related wellbeing gap. Particularly in light of experiences of shame and stigma, this cooperative approach can help rebuild trust, identify challenges and provide holistic support where families face complex and multifaceted challenges to their health and wellbeing due to entrenched poverty.

“I don’t feel comfortable speaking to social work, I don’t have a relationship with them.”

“I could trust her. I was never rushed. They [includem workers] will never say – I need to go now. They have that freedom to do that. That is so useful.”

⁵⁹ [Voices report \(2021\)](#)



“I have an includem worker. It was quite good, you felt included. I was able to talk to them. They were very open and always open-minded.” [60](#)

Holistic support can begin to bridge gaps between home and school, and provide targeted support built around the hopes and aspirations of children, young people and families.

“I felt listened to by the includem worker but I didn’t feel listened to by the teachers at primary school and they were not very understanding. They used to pin us for everything and listen to the teachers but not listen to me...I went to groups and told them about ADHD and I think I helped them to understand more. I think people could be better at understanding more.”

“They understand in a different way and they know us all so well. She asked last week are you ok, you don’t look yourself. And that made me think, I am sad. I don’t feel myself. It made me think this is a struggle. We were always resistant to respite... And it was a kind way, it felt as if... Maybe I do need to say yes to the respite. It felt – because it’s natural and they know us – it wasn’t a criticism or we could do better...in all the years we have been involved - I can’t remember anyone saying are you ok.” [61](#)

For in-school interventions, there needs to be a further exploration into the use of restorative practices and building relationships to reduce rates of exclusion.

Building the foundations of a wellbeing economy can help address core causes of health and wellbeing inequities.

The drive to transition to a wellbeing economy must be reflected at the budgetary level and in measurements of success. In prioritising policies that recognise and mitigate social and economic factors affecting family wellbeing instead of merely mitigating its symptoms, (whether in the form of food poverty, period poverty, fuel poverty or the poverty related attainment gap) children and young people’s health and wellbeing can more effectively safeguarded. This can also help avoid more costly interventions down the line. To meaningfully target and measure the impact of interventions on children and young people, there must be a focus on the poverty related wellbeing gap (including attainment) and use of measurements that provide a clearer picture of under supported communities.

How does addressing poverty lead to improved health and social care outcomes?

As set out above, entrenched poverty has substantial repercussions on the health and wellbeing of children and young people. As the key driver to health inequalities – including its impact on food insecurity, fuel poverty, mental and physical health, access to social and

[60 Voices report \(2021\)](#)

[61 Voices report \(2021\)](#)



educational activities as well as support services – it must be the primary starting point in efforts to seek improvements. Policy development that seeks genuine change cannot be siloed across these areas but must recognise the interlinking elements of many of these challenges.

Measures with cross-portfolio solutions addressing income and wellbeing gaps could have a dramatic impact. Because of the highly complex, multifaceted nature of entrenched poverty, an integrated approach across multiple levels of interventions is key.⁶² For systematic change it is not enough to focus on individual employability/upskilling or attainment initiatives within an economic system driven by low income & insecure labour. While this increases individual competitiveness in the same limited job pool, it does not address the underlying structural issues resulting in limited good quality job opportunities, particularly in impoverished areas.⁶³ The structural change this consultation calls for is about bringing high-level policy ideas away from single pronged solutions that respond to symptoms of poverty, but to build ambitious structural change, addressing poverty as a key driver to interlinked poor outcomes with action plans, governance and structures that support continuous improvement.

We challenge the Scottish Parliament to use her broader scope of devolved powers to develop and undertake cross-portfolio solutions on tackling poverty to address health and wellbeing inequalities, and – where possible - influence Westminster to undertake the structural change that under supported children, young people and families need.

⁶² Marshall Lee, E., Hinger, C., Lam, H. and Wood, K. (2021)

⁶³ Rank, Eppard and Bullock (2021)



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