

# **The Scottish Strategy to End Child Poverty: Roundtable Discussion Forum Report**

**Poverty Alliance  
21 January 2011**



# **The Scottish Strategy to End Child Poverty: Roundtable Discussion Forum**

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Attendees: Peter Kelly (Poverty Alliance), (Chair), Maggie Kelly, (Poverty Alliance), (Discussion Facilitator), Jim McCormick (Joseph Roundtree Foundation), Sarah Welford (Poverty Alliance), (Notes), Heather Smith (Scottish Government), (Notes), Sam Coope (Scottish Government), Milind Kolhatkar (EVOG), Marion Davis (OPFS), John Dickie (CPAG in Scotland), Douglas Hamilton (Save the Children UK ), Alex Bauer (Church of Scotland), James Egan (GCPH), Helen Martin, (STUC), Robert McGregor (Fife Council), Peter Allan (Dundee City Council), Lorraine Gillies (West Lothian Council), David Hornell (North Ayrshire Council), Richard Withington (GCPH), Norma Greenwood (NHS GGC), Dee Gildea (Inclusion Scotland ), Sharon McIntyre (Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum), Jackie Erdman (NHS GGC), Kate Wallace (Barnardos Scotland), Calum Webster (Scottish Government).

Note: Sam Coope, Calum Webster and Heather Smith attended in a listening capacity for the Scottish Government.

## **Introduction**

The Child Poverty Act, which came into force in October 2010, sets out specific targets to 'eradicate' child poverty by 2020. The Act requires the Scottish Government to draw up a three year strategy which must set out what steps the Scottish Government intend to take to meet the specific targets by 2020 and, as far as possible, to ensure that children in Scotland do not experience socio-economic disadvantage. The Scottish Government has already conducted a written consultation on the Scottish Strategy and this event also feeds into that consultation.

The aim of the roundtable was to enhance the consultation process and provide a forum for expert stakeholders to feed into the consultation in a more in depth, discursive manner. Representatives with expertise in child poverty were invited from a range of organisations and sectors including local authorities, NHS and the third sector. The roundtable was designed to allow an exchange of ideas and experience from across sectors and between individuals. To encourage a free exchange of ideas the discussion took place under Chatham House Rules.

The roundtable focused in particular on what is needed within the Scottish Strategy to ensure that action to meet the overall targets is taken forward and prioritised at a local level – drawing on how local delivery works now, and how it can work more effectively in the future. The focus and key questions for consideration by the group were circulated to participants in advance (see Appendix 2). Key themes from the discussion are summarised in this report.

## **Roundtable**

### **Context**

Peter Kelly, chairing, opened the discussion by setting out the questions for consideration within the broader context of the challenges we face, namely the impact of the recession and the cuts announced by the UK Government. He reminded us that given these constraints, focusing on driving forward action to tackle child poverty at a local level, is critical. He asked the group to consider “How do we do this and how do we know that we are making a difference?”

### **Introduction**

The discussion was introduced with a contribution from Dr Jim McCormick.

The landscape is changing really quickly on this agenda in Westminster. The shift toward focusing on individual behavioural changes rather than the broader picture is accelerating. But, there is a lack of analysis around how these changes will be brought about. There is a real lack of evidence in current policy making. Much of it seems to be based on an article of faith “just do it and see what happens”. In practice, a lot may simply not be feasible.

There has been a coarsening and narrowing of the language used to discuss poverty. Much of the debate on poverty is loaded towards the small percentage of families who have chaotic lives, such as those living with addiction, for example. The discussion needs to be broader, addressing the vast majority of families living in poverty: those on low pay, people moving in and out of poverty and the role of employers.

There is there is a need for better intelligence to inform policy. There are gaps in our knowledge. For example, we need better evidence on ethnicity and poverty and unpaid work, both legal and illegal activity. When we do have high quality evidence about what is working well we should treat them as precious jewels but we don't always do this. Working for Families (WFF) for example, has produced very good qualitative data demonstrating “what works”.

Under the Concordat we don't always know what is happening in some local authorities. Some are doing better than others at using evidence and protecting investment in the areas that we know are working and will make a difference. We need better monitoring frameworks to identify the areas which aren't working as well and we need to do more to ensure we prioritise what works.

Under devolution we have made real progress in tackling child poverty in Scotland. The long term drivers of poverty such as education and health are devolved. We need to be patient as these goals are long term but also ambitious about what we can achieve. Some key short term drivers are reserved but we must also recognise that Scottish powers are not just legislative, we also have soft powers which we can utilise.

We need to set standards about what is expected from the private sector. We should make it plain that we expect business to respect workers rights under employment law. We can reinforce this message through, for example, supporting the provision of independent employment advice services. Scotland can take a lead on poverty premiums, engaging more with energy companies and monitoring the impact, for example, of tariff rates. We can use cultural leadership to influence a whole range of areas, in employment practice, with energy companies and in banking standards. We can make the case for, and support the private sector to move towards, a Living Wage.

In relation to accountability we have gone from centrally led micro management to the Concordat. Could it be said that the Concordat was right for it's time (pre-recession) but wrong now, for child poverty? Anti poverty is a huge issue, and responsibility has to go wider than local authorities. Many are crying out for guidance, for evidence of good practice, what works and where to start.

The Scottish Government needs to be tight on aims but relaxed on means and could legitimately argue for this within the boundaries of the Concordat. Some local authorities are struggling with the anti poverty agenda, including those who may have a particularly difficult economic environment. How do we address this lack of progress? Unless we have appropriate accountability mechanisms how will we know if we are making progress or not? There should still be an accountability loop between the local and the national as the local picture contributes to the overall perspective. We also need to get better at learning across local authority boundaries and incentivise sharing to contribute to better outcomes.

We need to engage in workforce development and to involve frontline practitioners in a much more sophisticated dialogue. We need to focus on liberating and empowering front line staff so that they feel part of the bigger picture. In the current crisis the need for this more sophisticated approach is greater than ever. We need adequate support and resources to empower to practitioners to rise to these challenges.

## **Group Discussion**

### **Part One**

Maggie Kelly introduced the discussion and outlined the issues for consideration in the first half of the discussion (see Appendix 2).

The need for leadership was highlighted. Putting it bluntly, one participant commented that the Government seems scared to govern. For Local Authorities to take child poverty seriously, central government needs to provide clear direction and scrutiny. They have to show that it really matters.

A number of people commented on the relationship between local authorities and central government. One stated that the Concordat needs a better balance between prescription and freedom. It is certainly not the case that all budgets go into the pot at the moment under the Concordat, a substantial amount remains ring fenced and in some areas scrutiny remains e.g. HEAT targets and the HMIE inspection regime. We should take the opportunity to make better use of scrutiny and ring fencing.

The size and complexity of the challenge was an issue. One participant commented that child poverty is like climate change – a massive issue, which can feel overwhelming. There are so many areas which need action; it is difficult to know how to prioritise. Given the size of the issue, there is too much responsibility on local authorities to deliver the poverty agenda.

Another agreed, the child poverty agenda is massive - people don't know where to start and this is not helped by the lack of an overarching national child poverty strategy. At a local level there may be discussion and ideas from enthusiastic individuals but how do we achieve joint action across departments and accountability without a clear strategy?

These issues linked into the need for better coordination and communication. It was noted that some local authorities are developing their own child poverty strategies in their respective areas. However, there is a lack of cross fertilization of what works. We are not building on what we know works well at a national level.

Another roundtable member commented that some structures that are in place actually work against this agenda. For example, the silos that can operate at the community planning level, when we need action across a range of areas.

Another commented that there is a lack of coordinated information, for example they could not even find out who else was responding to the written consultation. Having a strategy is not sufficient, there needs to be accountability at a high level.

The roundtable heard about the Child Poverty Unit which is cross departmental, at UK level and that there is a lot of learning, partnership co-ordination and networking going on at a local level across England. This was seen as being in marked contrast to the situation in Scotland.

Workforce development was highlighted. One participant commented that social workers, for example, go into this type of work because they want to make a difference but the day to day stress of heavy case loads works against this. Teachers face the same issues. Their initial high ideals and enthusiasm that had brought them into the profession, gets lost in the daily grind. We need to recapture some of that bigger picture.

The importance of focusing on prevention was stressed. One participant stated we don't have time, space or capacity to focus on prevention. We are too busy with emergency

situations. The consequence is that we are still dealing with the same areas thirty years down the line. We need to ask “How do we create the capacity to do prevention?”

The importance of early intervention versus crisis intervention was also spoken about. One person observed that many areas are good at dealing reactively to a crisis but aren't geared up for early intervention. We also need to improve how we measure the impacts of early intervention. This is something that we are still grappling with and we are not there yet with the outcomes approach.

Another commented that whilst we still face big challenges, we should not forget the progress that was made in the past 10 'good years' on this agenda. We can and should learn from what worked during this time.

The work of the Tackling Poverty Board and their conclusions were flagged up as a good opportunity to frame some of this agenda – in terms of both long and short term actions needed.

It was suggested that the strategy be framed around ten practical and specific actions that Scotland has power over and that would make a real difference.

One participant highlighted the fact that our ageing population is a dominant feature: how we are going to cope with an ageing population and how they will be looked after? Are we making best use of the talent and experience of older people? What about the role of volunteering? We also need to focus on the wider cultural aspects of the agenda, not just the economic. Any strategy has to take these issues into consideration.

The importance of access to education, skills training and lifelong learning for parents was highlighted. In contrast to this, current UK Government policy was described as a brutal work first approach. No matter what your situation is when your child is five – you are deemed ready to work. This can create barriers for parents, especially lone parents, preventing them from accessing opportunities which could lead to more sustainable outcomes.

Another commented that early intervention does not just mean “early years”. It links into programmes like Working for Families (WFF). Sustainable employment and getting the right integrated child care is critical. WFF makes these links but it has fallen off the agenda. It is not enough to simply hope that local authorities will take up the WFF model.

We heard the view that the wider context may offer opportunities as well as challenges – if we are alive to that possibility. The pace and size of changes that we are facing in relation to cuts in welfare entitlement and service provision is likely to lead to a range of discontinuities. We need to consider how we can utilize potential discontinuities as opportunities.

We heard that even though there is a lot of good work being done at a local level, there is not enough coherent drive and some areas are not prioritising the anti poverty agenda . Welfare rights advice for example, is critical in tackling child poverty, especially in the current economic crisis, yet despite this some local authorities are talking about cuts to advice services.

One person stressed that in the period up to 2005 child poverty was reduced. We should remember that. A decision was made at Westminster to make it a key priority, Departments in Westminster were told to take action and it happened. It can be done, if there is the political will.

The issue of a child poverty duty was discussed. One participant commented that in earlier discussions, it had been suggested there was no need to place a legal duty on local authorities because the forthcoming a socio-economic inequality duty (included at that time in the Equality Bill) would be sufficient to ensure that action was prioritised. However, since the socio-economic duty has now been scrapped, the Scottish Government should revisit the issue. We need a duty, which provides for accountability and ensures that child poverty is at the center of decision-making processes. Another commented that a duty needs to link into Equality Impact Assessments and a comprehensive Poverty Toolkit.

Finally, we were reminded of the need to consider child poverty holistically. Our strategies need to encompass, for example, the income maximization and the expenditure agenda, pre school education, child care, the place agenda, how we skew regeneration budgets and so on.

## **Part Two**

Maggie Kelly introduced the second half of the discussion and outlined the questions for consideration (see Appendix 2).

The need to take account of the impact of up and coming welfare reform cuts announced in the June Budget and CSR was emphasised. The strategy must take these into account so that negative impacts are mitigated if child poverty is not to increase.

It was highlighted that although we are used to thinking that key levers for action are reserved, this may be changing soon. For example, in the White Paper there is a proposal to devolve council tax benefit to the Scottish Government (with a 10% cut in funding). This would be a huge challenge but whatever the funding constraints are, it is also an opportunity. We have to consider “How can we make use of any newly devolved control of welfare benefits, to tackle child poverty?”

One participant emphasised that we should consider tackling child poverty as the broad ethical framework for policy making at a local level. We need to consider it in relation to every function of the local authority. A Toolkit could be developed with child poverty as a golden thread through all the policies.

One roundtable member noted that for some local authorities their concern is simply budget cuts “Where are we going to make cuts?” and “How can we manage budgets?” is their priority and poverty is pretty low on the agenda. Moving people into work has been a key focus for many, but it isn’t enough now when there are no jobs.

Another commented that the focus on managing budgets meant that poverty proofing is really important. There is a choice here and we need to look at the impact on the poorest of the spending decisions we take and central Government must provide guidance on this.

Another responded that, in terms of the current budget round, for many local authorities, it is too late to engage in poverty proofing. They can do impact assessments but given the time scale, it too late to get those councils who are not focused on tackling child poverty, to engage at this late stage.

Participants commented on the importance of childcare. The reduction in the proportion of tax credit help that people can get with eligible childcare costs, from 80% - 70%, due to be implemented in April, will act as a major barrier to those who want to move into and/or stay in work, especially lone parents. This meant that action to provide flexible, high quality and affordable child care was more important than ever.

One participant commented that earlier commitments to improved childcare provision outlined elsewhere had not been delivered and any new strategy should have structures in place to ensure that high level targets are taken forward on the ground.

Another stressed that the UK Government cuts will have a very disproportionate impact by region within Scotland. The welfare cuts will have a much bigger impact in areas with higher unemployment. We need a strategy to take account of this and ensure that those areas which will be hit hardest get the help they need.

They emphasised that the UK Government approach is focused on work as the route out of poverty but for many there are no jobs or, if there are, they are badly paid and part time. The only growth in my area is in charity shops and money lenders, so we have to focus on job creation.

Another participant also emphasised the need to link the strategy into wider economic development. We should consider the need to shift employment trends, the need to focus on young people and consider what kind of economy are we looking at in future.

Another commented that in relation to job creation we have to ask "How do we make sure that the jobs we invest in are of a type that people can take them up?" We need to ensure that parents have the right training and that jobs are flexible and family friendly.

The need to include concrete steps to promote a Living Wage was highlighted. As one person put it “More people earn their poverty than claim it”. There was more that could be

done to promote a Living Wage and progress it in both the public and private sectors. In the public sector, there is a need for it to be rolled out to all local authorities as well as central Government.

One person stated that with Single Outcome Agreements (SOA's) coming to an end, there is a window of opportunity to look critically at why they haven't worked well and act quickly to put a new framework in place. SOA's have not been drivers of change. They have not changed peoples practice. For us it is just a paper exercise which doesn't link into decision making in a meaningful way.

Another member commented that a much more sophisticated approach was needed such as working back from long term outcomes using logic modeling. This was something which they had found useful in arriving at specific concrete objectives.

One participant talked about how we are seeing a lot of discussion about the need to abandon universal service provision and focus services on the most vulnerable, given current financial constraints. However, this is a very short term approach. In the long run it will only increase inequalities and undermine social solidarity which will in turn impact on child poverty.

Another roundtable member commented that in terms of economic outcomes tackling child poverty is the best economic argument we have. It costs us £25 billion a year. We need to have cost effective policies and tackling child poverty is very effective.

One participant emphasised that you cannot talk about tackling child poverty without talking about women's poverty. Women are more likely to have low paid, part time, temporary jobs. They are more at risk of being in poverty generally and they are usually the primary carers for children. This is a big issue which is not being given enough attention. We should consider other groups likely to be at greater risk of poverty too, for example, families living with disability. To be effective any strategy has to take account these issues.

One member stressed the need to challenge the perception that Scotland will turn a blind eye to breaches of employment law in return for investment by certain types of big business. The jobs on offer are all too often low paid with poor conditions, they are not family friendly or flexible. They relocate when an even cheaper labour market is found internationally. Instead, we need to think about work which can't be relocated elsewhere around the globe. For example, there is a growing need for high quality care. Denmark invests twice as much in the care sector – it is high quality and labour intensive and we could make a similar investment.

Finally, one participant commented that the level and quality of the debate around the table had given him greater hope about what we can achieve. Social and environmental justice is something that we all aspire to. We need to look at action to tackle child poverty as a critical part of the much wider agenda to achieve both social and environmental justice in Scotland.

### **Discussion Round up**

Peter Kelly closed the discussion by highlighting the breath of issues which had been discussed. He noted that the discussion had highlighted (in no particular order) the need for leadership, the need for improved accountability in the relationship between local and national Government, including SOA's, the importance of linking strategy into the broader economy and measures to tackle unemployment, the need for specific action to focus on childcare, the importance of prevention and early intervention, the need to mitigate the impact of UK Government spending cuts, the need for better communication and sharing of good practice, the importance of monitoring and scrutiny at a national level, the importance of cultural change to push child poverty up the agenda and the need to recognise the role of gender and the equalities agenda in genera within the future Scottish Strategy.

Sam Coope thanked everyone for their participation in what had been an excellent discussion. The discussion and the resulting report would not just feed directly into the development of the strategy, due to be published in March, it would continue to inform the development an implementation of the Scottish Strategy after that. She hoped that the Scottish Government could continue to have a dialogue with roundtable participants in future.

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## **The Scottish Strategy to End Child Poverty: Roundtable Discussion Forum**

### **Agenda**

- 9.30 am      Tea and Coffee, registration
- 10.00 am     Introductions and Welcome  
Setting the context  
Chair: Peter Kelly, Director, Poverty Alliance
- 10.10 am     The Scottish Strategy to End Child Poverty:  
What needs to be in the strategy to ensure that action is taken forward at  
local level?  
Dr Jim Mc Cormick, Joseph Roundtree Foundation
- 10.30 am     Facilitated discussion part 1  
Facilitator : Maggie Kelly, Poverty Alliance
- 11.15 am     Tea and coffee
- 11.30 am     Facilitated discussion part 2  
Facilitator : Maggie Kelly, Poverty Alliance
- 12.15 pm     Discussion round up  
Chair: Peter Kelly, Director, Poverty Alliance
- 12.30 pm     Networking lunch

### Discussion Themes

#### Focus

The Roundtable will focus in particular on what is needed within the Scottish Strategy, to ensure that action to meet the overall targets is taken forward and prioritised at a local level – drawing on how local delivery works now, and how it can work more effectively in the future.

#### Discussion Questions

##### Session 1

What are the main constraints to tackling child poverty and socio economic disadvantage in Scotland, at a local level?

What do you think should be the priority areas for action in the child poverty strategy to ensure that action is taken forward at a local level to:

- meet the 2010 targets on child poverty?
- ensure that as far as possible, children in Scotland do not experience socio-economic disadvantage?
- ensure that children at greater risk of poverty, including for example, children living in lone parent families, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, those who are disabled (or live in a household with a disabled family member), and those who are looked after, are prioritised?

##### Session 2

What can Scottish Government do to effectively support its partners at a local level to tackle child poverty and socio economic disadvantage, including ensuring that those who are at greater risk of poverty, are prioritised?

What are your views on the value of child poverty proofing local budgets and strategies?

What are your views on existing measures to monitor progress on tackling child poverty at a local level?

Are they working well? Could they be improved?

Are they sufficient with regard to those groups who are at particular risk of poverty?