

Universal Vs targeted services

Universal services are considered more efficient, cheaper to administer and less stigmatising than targeted services. However, an argument can also be made for targeting resources at those who are most in need so as not to fund those who could easily fund themselves. A more balanced approach is to use a blend of universal and targeted services, depending on the service in question for example:

- Targeting free breakfast clubs at the poorest is not considered the best use of resources when there could be a universal service with a sliding scale of fees that would encourage wider use, double up as pre-school childcare and eliminate the stigma of having to be fed by the council.
- A service to build the social capital of lone parents living in poverty, however, should be targeted in order to reach those most in need of the service.

By considering every initiative through the lens of poverty-proofing, minimising stigma and maximising engagement, the CPP could make their decisions on a case by case basis.

Strategic steps to begin poverty mitigation and prevention:

- Ensure everyone across the entire CPP has ownership over the local approach to tackling child poverty.
- Involve local people living in poverty in discussions and planning (coproduction).
- Keep awareness raising and stigma reduction at the core of services.
- Implement evidence-based practice.
- Provide ongoing education and training of CPP members and relevant staff.

Actions the CPP can take to prevent and mitigate poverty in their local area:

- **Income maximisation:** Increase uptake of benefit entitlements; provide accessible money advice services; prevent or mitigate the effects of benefit sanctions; address the poverty premium; review policy on economic development to ensure good quality and family friendly employment; and ensure their own locally-administered benefit systems are working well, with minimal delay, error and maladministration.
- **Education:** Encourage take up of free school meals and school clothing grants, investigate which costs of the school day could be abolished, and build positive relationships with parents so that they feel comfortable accessing available supports.
- **Childcare:** Take steps to improve current provision by assessing whether there is sufficient childcare available for working parents; exploring funding models that use a sliding scale; and supporting voluntary, community or parent-led providers of childcare, and ensuring provision is of high quality.
- **Support for lone parents:** Take account of the needs of lone parents across council services of work, support, childcare and education.

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References

Full references can be found in the report at www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk



What Works Scotland Evidence Briefing

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Tackling child poverty: Actions to prevent and mitigate child poverty at the local level

About this briefing

This briefing summarises a review of evidence commissioned by South Ayrshire local authority to support its Community Planning Partnership (CPP) to:

1. Identify factors that may mitigate the effects of child poverty.
2. Make suggestions on how the local authority can act to prevent child poverty occurring.
3. Identify early trigger signs that may suggest an increased risk of poverty.

The full evidence review contains further findings, signposting, talking points, references and details of how the research was carried out. See www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk to download the full report.

The evidence review and briefing were produced by What Works Scotland's Evidence Bank for public service reform. The Evidence Bank provides appraised, accessible and action-oriented evidence reviews and other resources for those involved in public service delivery including CPPs, policy-makers, local authorities and third sector organisations.

Summary points

- Local authorities have a duty to improve the health and wellbeing of children living in poverty under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and the broader social policy framework of the Scottish Government. The 2017 Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill places a requirement on local authorities and health boards to prepare and publish a local child poverty action report.
- Local authorities and Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) do not have control over the macro-economic or political factors that drive the incidence and prevalence of child poverty. They can, however, harness their resources to the prevention and mitigation of child poverty locally, and exert their influence on Scottish and UK policies to support them.
- The causes of child poverty are often confused with its consequences. Child poverty is not caused by individual

behaviours but by a complex blend of structural issues relating to macro-economic and political factors governing the labour market, employment and social security. Social factors make particular groups especially vulnerable to poverty, e.g. children, lone parents, disabled people and BME groups.

- It is important to address the misunderstandings of the causes and consequences of child poverty among CPP staff and take steps to reduce stigma for those living in poverty, to counter the confusing narratives that blame families for their own poverty.
- While the topic of child poverty is covered extensively in the academic and grey literature¹, there are gaps in the research in relation to income maximisation, education, childcare and lone parenthood.
- Key strategies to identify when people are at risk of, or have recently fallen into, poverty and prevent it can be taken up by CPPs.

Introduction

The average child poverty rate across the 32 local authorities in Scotland is 22%, ranging from a low of 10% for the Shetland Islands to a high of 33% for Glasgow. Variations within local authorities places some wards out with this range.

While local authorities have limited powers over all the levers that drive child poverty, the evidence shows that the experience of poverty varies according to where people live. This is due to the access their particular neighbourhood provides to employment and to services such as education, transport, housing and childcare, amongst others (JRF, 2016: 14).

“A local authority’s role as an employer, carer, corporate parent, landlord, educator, community leader and funder places it at the heart of its community. In many cases, it remains the first port of call for people in crisis, or who are vulnerable. Considered through this lens the role played by a local authority in tackling poverty cannot be underestimated”

Armstrong-Walter, 2016: 205

The evidence landscape for child poverty is very diverse, crossing the fields of education, health and the social sciences. A multitude of quantitative and qualitative research projects and peer-reviewed journal articles cover the areas of poverty generally, child poverty, education, childcare and lone parenthood. There are also many high quality research outputs from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the field of poverty, children and child poverty specifically.

While the topic of child poverty is covered extensively in the academic and grey literature, the review identifies gaps in the research across the themes of income maximisation, education, childcare and lone parenthood. Wider factors including health, disability, housing, transport and area regeneration are important in impacting families in poverty but are considered too broad to be included in the review.

Defining child poverty

The evidence review adopts the definition used by governments, academics and other organisations working in the field of child poverty: When a family does not have the resources

“To obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged and approved, in societies in which they belong”

Townsend, 1979: 31

Confusing the causes and consequences of child poverty

There exists a difference between what is assumed and portrayed as the causes and consequences of child poverty in policy, practice and the media compared with what the research evidence shows. Frequently the causes and consequences of child poverty are confounded. Current research suggests there is still a widespread lack of understanding among those who can help mitigate its effects (Simpson et al. 2015; Spencer, 2015) therefore it is important

to address this confusion among local authority and CPP staff before beginning any poverty mitigation and prevention work.

Having a better understanding of the causes of child poverty would enable CPP staff to identify early signs that indicate a heightened risk of poverty, and reduce stigma for those living in poverty.

The causes of poverty

Child poverty is caused by a complex blend of structural issues: Macro-economic factors, such as the structure of the labour market, the housing market, low pay, irregular hours and insecure employment; and political factors, such as the level of social security payments and the recent social security cuts for families both in and out of work. Social factors, such as gender, lone parenthood, disability, age and race/ethnicity result in a heightened risk of living in poverty, often leaving children more severely affected by poverty and in need of greater support.

The consequences of poverty

Poverty has negative impacts on children’s health; cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development; friendships; self-esteem; relationships; experience of education; educational outcomes and access to employment.

The consequences of living in poverty include social exclusion and stigma, often arising from the misunderstandings about the causes of poverty. Good parenting is achieved in families regardless of income, but the experience of poverty creates greater challenges for families to overcome.

Findings from the evidence

Income Maximisation

Lack of awareness of entitlement is one of many reasons why significant proportions of people do not claim their full tax credit or benefit entitlement.

Income maximisation can help ensure all people are claiming the in-work and out-of-work benefits to which they are entitled. Income maximisation brings together many existing services in a more efficient and accessible way, resulting in great gains for local residents. Maximising families’ incomes also has the benefit of bringing money from external sources, e.g. national welfare, into the local area to be spent locally.

An integrated system for income maximisation might include: embedding money information and advice in frequently used existing services, providing an outreach service such as NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde’s Healthier Wealthier Children project, and/or having a dedicated money and employment hub.

Such services can also assist in reducing the poverty premium - where low-income households pay more for the same goods and services than others do because of the payment methods available to them (Harris et al, 2009), which costs low income families approximately 10% of their annual incomes.

Employment is no longer a guaranteed route out of poverty, given that two thirds of children in poverty are living in a family where at least one parent works. However, secure, well-paying

employment is still the best route out of poverty and confers other advantages to individuals, families and society.

Education

Education is critical to mitigating the effects of poverty, but inclusion in the education system is socially patterned, privileges the middle classes and brings with it costs that are often unseen and poorly understood by educators but keenly felt by children and families living in poverty.

The cost of schooling has a corrosive effect on children and young people’s ability to participate as full members of the school community. Children’s participation in school and out-of-school activities and trips is beneficial to their learning and to their social and cultural development, yet the costs can be prohibitive. Children report feelings of shame, anxiety and anger as a result of missing out on these opportunities.

Good parental engagement is vital to children’s educational outcomes. Often parents living in poverty have had poor educational experiences themselves and can feel intimidated or wary of participating in their child’s education. Schools need to build relationships with parents through non-threatening social engagement. This could improve uptake of entitlements such as free school meals and school clothing allowance, and also tie in with embedding other income maximisation initiatives in schools.

The costs that poorer parents face during school holidays is a growing problem (Butcher 2015). Families report finding it difficult to feed children outwith term time, particularly those who receive free school meals; difficulty in finding work-hours childcare; and guilt that they are unable to give their children the trips and experiences that other children enjoy during the school holidays (Butcher 2015).

Childcare

Save the Children Scotland found that a high proportion of those in severe poverty had to give up work, turn down a job, or not take up education or training because of difficulties accessing childcare. The increase in childcare costs and the reduction in fiscal support via child tax credits/universal credit will result in greater difficulty in paying for childcare.

As well as its role in supporting education and employment, high quality childcare is also good for children’s development. Good quality childcare and early education can have positive effects on children now and in the future as it contributes to better educational outcomes and to higher levels and quality of employment as adults (JRF, 2016).

Lone Parenthood

Lone parents are usually female (86% in the UK and 91% in Scotland) and are more strongly affected by the inequalities that affect women more generally, e.g. gender pay gap.

Contrary to the myth of the young lone unmarried mother, the average age of lone mothers in Scotland is 36 years old and they have usually previously been married (McKendrick, 2016). Lone parenthood is not usually a permanent status for families in Scotland but is often another stage in family life that lasts on average around 5½ years (McKendrick, 2016: 104). It is estimated that around one third to one half of all

children in Scotland will spend time in a lone parent family formation (McKendrick, 2016: 104).

Stigma against lone parents can exacerbate the effects of poverty. The negative effects of stigma and shame lead to “social exclusion, limited social capital, low self-worth, and a lack of agency that could all serve to prolong poverty” (Walker, 2014: 49), which may be counteractive to initiatives to mitigate poverty.

Research shows that it is not lone motherhood itself that is associated with poorer child outcomes but the poverty, deprivation and lack of social support structures they experience. Lone mothers are more likely to have low-quality insecure employment, which has detrimental impacts on children. Supporting lone parents into stable employment that enables them to balance work and childcare is key to improving outcomes for children.

Conclusion

The opportunity to identify when people are at risk of, or have recently fallen into, poverty and prevent it presents itself throughout the themes covered in this review. Poverty prevention and mitigation are not necessarily different approaches. Through income maximisation services, particularly those delivered pre-, per- or post- pregnancy, it would be possible to identify signs of financial vulnerability with the right training such as that provided by Healthier Wealthier Children.

Given the right training, schools should be able to recognise those who are financially vulnerable. Signs include: being repeatedly late with lunch money; missing out on activities such as active schools programmes because of limited resources or tight deadlines for payment; missing school when it is wear your own clothes day, especially where this bears a cost.

The local authority can help identify financial vulnerability by engaging with residents in a supportive fashion the first time they fall behind in rent, council tax or other services. People prioritise their homes so this may indicate that they are already behind in paying other bills. Finally, parents, but usually mothers, sacrifice their own food, heat, clothing, activities and social engagement when income is very low. By being mindful of this professionals in contact with families may recognise early signs of poverty and, again with the right training, be able to offer help such as sign-posting to an income maximisation service.