

DATA LABEL: PUBLIC



COUNCIL EXECUTIVE

UPDATE ON AUDIT SCOTLAND TACKLING CHILD POVERTY BRIEFING

REPORT BY HEAD OF FINANCE AND PROPERTY SERVICES

A. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of the report is to inform Council Executive of the recommendations set out in a recent Tackling Child Poverty briefing from Audit Scotland and to highlight the local approach to address child poverty in West Lothian.

B. RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Council Executive notes:

1. The range of recommendations set out in the recent tackling child poverty briefing from Audit Scotland; and,
2. The current approach to tackling child poverty in West Lothian and plans for the review and refresh of the West Lothian Anti-Poverty Strategy.

C. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS

I	Council Values	Focusing on our customers' needs; being honest, open and accountable; providing equality of opportunities; developing employees; making best use of our resources; working in partnership
II	Policy and Legal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equality Issues, Health or Risk Assessment)	Reducing inequalities and poverty are key priorities set out in both the Corporate Plan 2018/19 to 2022/23 and in the Community Planning Partnership Anti-Poverty Strategy 2018 to 2023.
III	Implications for Scheme of Delegations to Officers	None.
IV	Impact on performance and performance Indicators	SOA1301_11 Percentage of children in poverty in West Lothian
V	Relevance to Single Outcome Agreement	We have tackled significant inequalities in West Lothian society; We have improved the life chances for people at risk; We take pride in a strong, fair and inclusive society.

VI	Resources - (Financial, Staffing and Property)	Significant resources are deployed by the council and CPP partners to address child poverty
VII	Consideration at PDSP	None
VIII	Other consultations	Ongoing consultations with other service areas and community planning partners.

D. TERMS OF REPORT

D.1 Background

A recent Audit Scotland briefing report has warned that longer-term joint planning is needed to address child poverty in Scotland and meet the ambitious targets set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017.

The Scottish Government's first tackling child poverty delivery plan covered the four-year period from 2018 to 2022. The briefing report raises concern with the difficulty in assessing the success of this plan due to the disruption to data collection during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The new tackling child poverty delivery plan for 2022 to 2026 has now been implemented and Scottish Government modelling predicts that successful delivery of the actions within the new plan will lead to decreased rates of relative child poverty in line with interim targets by 2023/24.

D.2 Audit Scotland Tackling Child Poverty Briefing

The report, published in September 2022, raises concerns around the availability of data and scope of child poverty indicators.

Relative poverty measures the proportion of children living in households with income lower than 60% of the median household income and is often referred to as the headline indicator of child poverty. The report raises concern that this indicator is primarily focused on income as a measure of poverty and does not account for external factors including the rising cost of living. Scottish Government modelling predicts that rates of relative poverty among children in Scotland will reduce to 17% by 2023/24 following introduction of the policies included in the Child Poverty Delivery Plan.

In contrast, absolute poverty and combined low income and material deprivation indicators provide insight into the impact of increases in the cost of basic goods and services on households, but modelling has predicted rates of 16% by 2023/24, falling short of the interim target of 14%.

Due to lack of robust data during the covid-19 pandemic, the Scottish Government only published official statistics for one out of four child poverty indicators for 2020/21. Data for relative child poverty, absolute child poverty and combined low income and material deprivation are only available up to 2019/20. It is therefore difficult to fully assess the impact of child poverty policies and address any factors that might impede progress toward targets in real time.

Local estimates of relative child poverty are available for the period 2020/21. These estimates are based on a separate data source to the official Scottish Government statistics but do provide a useful insight into relative poverty rates locally. Latest estimates indicate 21.1% of children in West Lothian were found to

experience poverty after housing costs in 2020/21, a reduction from 24.6% in 2019/20

The Audit Scotland briefing concludes that the Scottish Government and its partners will need to take significant action to meet the 2030/31 child poverty targets. The report sets out a number of recommendations as follows:

Councils, and national groups they participate in, should:

- consider how best to share information about what councils are doing to tackle child poverty and its impact. This would support learning and improvement. They should also ensure this is supported by robust data and evaluation.

The Scottish Government and councils should:

- consistently use the suite of child poverty indicators to reflect the impact of cost of living increases on low-income families
- consider how to improve national and local data to ensure that it fully captures and measures the characteristics and complexity of children living in poverty and the impact of actions on outcomes for children across different demographic groups.

D.3 Local Approach to Tackling Child Poverty in West Lothian

Child poverty is closely monitored through the West Lothian Anti-Poverty Strategy and reported regularly to the Anti-Poverty Task Force. A local Child Poverty Reference Group has been set up with responsibility to produce the annual Local Child Poverty Action Report. A two-year child poverty action plan has been developed for the period 2021 to 2023 to align with the end of the current anti-poverty strategy.

The West Lothian anti-poverty strategy covers the period to 31 March 2023. Since its development, there have been a number of events that have had a significant impact on the landscape of poverty; Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis have led to legislative changes, economic instability and increased demand for anti-poverty services.

The current strategy will be analysed to review what has and has not worked well and to assess the impact of the strategy over its lifetime. It is important that the refresh of the anti-poverty strategy is informed by the views of key stakeholders. A programme of consultation will therefore be carried out with those with lived experience of poverty, local community groups and organisations and services leading on the delivery of local activity to address poverty.

Consideration will also be given to other local and national strategies and plans to ensure that anti-poverty activity in West Lothian is co-ordinated to meet shared outcomes. These include:

West Lothian	Scotland
West Lothian Council Corporate Plan	Fairer Scotland Duty and Action Plan
Local Outcome Improvement Plan	Fuel Poverty Strategy
Children and Families Strategic Plan	Draft plan to end food insecurity

Local Housing Strategy	Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 (Local Child Poverty Action Reports)
HSCP Carers Strategy	Best Start, Bright Futures: Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022 – 2026

Actions to address child poverty will be developed in cognizance of the targets and priorities laid out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and the current Child Poverty Delivery Plan and will continue to be reported annually through the Local Child Poverty Action Report.

E. CONCLUSION

The recommendations from Audit Scotland have a strong focus on partnership work and sharing of information across networks to develop interventions and approaches that are informed by robust local data.

As further data becomes available and more is known about the impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis on official statistics, officers will assess this in order to develop and shape work going forward.

The current West Lothian Anti-Poverty Strategy covers the period to the end of 2022/23 and work has begun on consultation and review of the current strategy to refresh the strategic aims and outcomes going forward. Future plans will be developed to account for the impact of wider economic factors and a robust plan of action will be produced to tackle poverty over the next five-year period.

F. BACKGROUND REFERENCES

Audit Scotland Briefing: Tackling Child Poverty: <https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/publications/briefing-tackling-child-poverty>

Update on Child Welfare Measures following the UK budget.
<https://coins.westlothian.gov.uk/coins/submissiondocuments.asp?submissionid=53346>

Appendices/Attachments:

None.

Contact Person: Nahid Hanif, Anti-Poverty Manager, Tel: 01506 283022
Nahid.Hanif@westlothian.gov.uk

Donald Forrest
Head of Finance and Property Services
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