

Scottish Borders Anti-Poverty Strategy

Context

The Scottish Borders is located in the South East of Scotland adjoining the border with England. The Scottish Borders face particular challenges due to its rurality, such as limited job opportunities and low incomes, restricted access to key services, an ageing demographic, and fuel deprivation. Below are key figures which depict the issues the Scottish Borders is facing:

- The dependency ratio is 70%, meaning that for every 1,000 people of working age there are 700 of non-working age. This is higher than the average in Scotland and is expected to increase.
- In 2021, the gross weekly full-time workplace-based wage in the Scottish Borders was £96 less per week than the average level for Scotland, making it the 2nd lowest of the 32 Scottish Local Authority areas.
- 29% of households are fuel-poor, equivalent to approximately 16,000 households. Of these households, 38% are older people and 51% live in social housing.

Of the six case studies, this is the only local anti-poverty strategy outside of England. We have chosen Scottish Borders as in Scotland there is legislation which requires Scottish local authorities and health boards to jointly prepare Local Child Poverty Action Plans detailing the activity they are taking and will take to contribute towards the Child Poverty targets set out in the Act ([see chapter one](#)).

However, the motivation for a dedicated anti-poverty strategy was that the council and different bodies such as the health board and housing associations were each trying to address poverty through different measures but there was no overall coordination. In September 2020, to bridge this gap three councillors brought a motion forward to the Scottish Borders council to develop an anti-poverty strategy and action plan.

The overarching strategy establishes a strategic framework to improve how the council and its partners collaborate to tackle the significant challenges associated with poverty reduction. The council emphasised that the Local Child Poverty Action Plan contains a wide range of actions that will contribute to achieving the outcomes set out in the strategy.

The council's anti-poverty strategy is not set in stone, the council and its partners will continually review what they do and change the strategy as circumstances require.

Scope and design

Vision

The council sets out the following vision in the strategy: *“We want a Scottish Borders where no-one lives in poverty and where everyone is able to achieve their full potential.*

We want the Scottish Borders to be a place where everyone can play their part in understanding that tackling poverty is everyone’s responsibility. We believe that if we act locally, and in partnership, we can make a real difference.

We want this Scottish Borders Anti-Poverty Strategy to be pro-active, evidenced by real experience, and directed by need. Working with the people of the Scottish Borders, we aim to find solutions to poverty challenges which support them in a way that works best for them”.

Poverty definition and identification of the drivers of poverty in the Scottish Borders

The council uses the Joseph Rowntree Foundation definitions of poverty - *“Poverty is when your resources are well below your minimum needs”* and *“Poverty means not being able to heat your home, pay your rent or buy essentials (e.g., a winter coat for a child, a fridge) for you or your children.”*

The strategy sets out the three key drivers of poverty as identified by the Scottish Government: income from employment, costs of living, and income from social security. In addition to these drivers, the Scottish Borders focuses on the following factors, which ‘contribute’ to or ‘compound’ poverty.

- Fuel poverty
- Housing poverty
- Food poverty
- Health and wellbeing
- Connections to family, friends, and community
- Digital exclusion

Funding

There is no specific funding for the strategy, they have repurposed different forms of funding to support actions. This includes Covid-19 funding; in 2021/22 the council delivered an underspend which they directed into the reserves and are now releasing to support the Cost-of-living Crisis and strategy-related priorities. Cost-of-living Crisis funding has also been directed towards the strategy.

Priorities

The strategy is underpinned by seven guiding principles. These include respect, resilience, person-focused, fairness, sustainability, shared, and communication.

The strategy is organised around six themes and eleven outcomes that the council and its partners are focused on achieving to help reduce poverty. The themes ‘pockets, prospects, and places’ have been structured around the Scottish Government’s Child Poverty Strategy measurement framework while ‘people’, ‘partnerships’, and ‘pathways’ have been chosen based on what the council and its partners recognise as being important to address poverty (Scottish Government, 2014). The accompanying action plan is designed to meet the outcomes listed below:

- Maximising income and reducing out-going costs of households (pockets);
- Attainment and achievement for children and young people to enable them to reach their potential; households are sustaining employment and re-skilling to enable them to seek alternative employment; health inequalities are being reduced and wellbeing is being promoted (prospects);
- Everyone lives in warm, affordable homes; affordable, convenient transport; digital connectivity for everyone (places);
- Increase opportunities and empower people to fully participate in their communities to bring about change; tackling poverty is everyone’s responsibility (people);
- Improve partnership working and networks to plan and deliver better services (partnerships): and
- Develop and implement pathways to support people to move from dependence to independence (pathways).

Development of the strategy

Anti-Poverty Working Group

In 2020, the council approved a motion setting up an anti-poverty working group to develop a draft strategy and action plan. The working group agreed on a vision: “We want a Scottish Borders where no one lives in Poverty and we want everyone to be able to achieve their full potential and feel healthy, happy, and valued”.

To develop the draft strategy, they took the following approach:

- Data and evidence gathering: the council examined and analysed relevant data and information on poverty in the Scottish Borders to understand the best approach to tackle poverty and identify where support is needed most.
- Partnership working: the council worked with key local partners including Citizens Advice Borders, Registered Social Landlords, Service Managers, the Third Sector Interface, and other voluntary organisations to ensure that appropriate issues were identified and included in the Strategy.
- Identifying best practice: Scottish Borders researched approaches that have been taken to tackle anti-poverty in other local authority areas.

The draft strategy was approved in February 2021. However, the council recognised that the draft strategy had been developed from a mainly internal perspective, and therefore to finalise the strategy and action plan they held public consultation with key local partners, communities, and other organisations.

Partnership working

Involving people with lived experience of poverty was vital to finalise the development of the strategy and action plan. The council co-produced the consultation with organisations that are directly involved in supporting those in poverty. This helped the council to understand the most appropriate form of consultation and consider potential questions to identify further actions that could be included in the strategy. They emphasised that lived experience involvement is ongoing to inform decision-making and to ensure the appropriate actions are included in the action plan.

The 'inform' consultation was undertaken from March to May 2021 and involved two public surveys. One was designed in relation to the draft strategy and the other was to inform the council about residents' current lived experience of poverty compared to pre-covid.

A summary of the key findings of both surveys is detailed below:

- Respondents emphasised that the vision of the strategy could be more ambitious, with more of a focus on education, infrastructure, chronic health, climate change, housing, and transport.
- Respondents identified additional opportunities for the council such as promoting the Living Wage more widely.
- Compared to pre-covid, respondents were managing less well financially, while awareness of available support was low in some areas and travel was highlighted as an increasing issue.

The council also sought feedback from Scottish Border Community Planning Partners which includes a number of strategic partners operating locally such as NHS Borders, Scottish Fire and Rescue, Borders College, four local housing associations, and voluntary sector organisations.

The council highlighted that their engagement with partner organisations and the wider community had enabled them to better understand the issues residents are facing and the importance of joint working. It highlighted a widespread lack of awareness of available support among the local community, and people were unsure how to access the help available. The strategy has enabled Scottish Borders to better promote and raise awareness of the support available, making it easier for people to get the help they need.

Moreover, they found that there was a lack of coordination and duplication across organisations particularly those working on financial inclusion. The council has now set up a financial inclusion practitioners' group that meets quarterly to discuss best practice. They aim to identify any gaps in the provision of support and consider further opportunities for closer working.

Delivering the strategy

The strategy is being delivered through the action plan. The action plan is structured around the themes of the strategy and desired outcomes and reflects the challenges and opportunities they have identified. They recognise that existing plans and strategies contribute significantly to meeting the outcomes, therefore they have been aligned to each of the outcomes set within the action plan. The council highlights they are measuring the impact of the actions taken for each outcome. The action plan is a live document and new actions are continuing to be developed as part of the work of the anti-poverty member's reference group.

Responsibility

The council highlights that tackling poverty is everybody's business. There is widespread acceptance throughout the council that every department that has relevance to people's well-being has a responsibility to consider poverty. They emphasised that many of the actions in the action plan are already underway as part of service delivery carried out by the council and key local partners, such as multi-agency Community Assistance Hubs, Resilient Community teams, and the Scottish Border Community Planning Partners.

Leadership

The strategy has cross-party support, with the council emphasising that anti-poverty has not been a point of contention but has always had support to drive work forward. There is an Executive Member for Communities and Equalities who has poverty as a named responsibility.

Links to other strategies

The strategy highlights that there are key plans and strategies in existence that contribute to reducing poverty in the Scottish Borders. They outline eight that include: Child Poverty Report Action Plan 2021/22, Affordable Warmth and Home: Energy Efficiency Strategy 2019-2023, and Scotland's Public Health Priorities. They emphasise that the strategy is not intended to replace work that is already been done, but rather to coordinate and strengthen work that the council and its partners are currently doing.

Monitoring and evaluation

The strategy outlines how its impacts will be monitored and evaluated. It highlights that the measurement indicators are not set in stone and work is continuing to develop an appropriate measurement framework.

They will monitor and evaluate in a variety of ways:

- The Covid-19 recovery matrix/index will be used as a baseline.
- Partners will provide updates as part of regular progress reporting of the action plan.
- Existing indicators in other plans and strategies will be reported where they relate to the action plan.
- A longer-term assessment of the impact of the strategy will be conducted. The council will focus on what has been done, how successful it has been, and what other possible plans and interventions could be added to the strategy. This will be used to make recommendations for future strategy development.

Oversight and governance

Anti-Poverty Members Reference Group

The members reference group has replaced the anti-poverty strategy working group. This has been set up to monitor the implementation of the strategy and action plan. It is made up of seven elected members of the council, appointed on a non-partisan basis. They also receive input from the council's partners and other organisations and individuals, including those with lived experience of poverty. They give guidance to officers and report to the council as necessary. This aims to ensure that the strategy remains appropriate to address identified current or emerging issues as well as being realistic and achievable. They meet on a quarterly basis (as a minimum) and an annual progress report is presented to the council.