Challenging Rural Poverty in Scotland – Online Annual Event
Despite Scotland's great wealth, rural and island Scotland have been hit hardest by the cost-of-living crisis. Too many people living rurally are held back by poverty. It is not right that it costs 15-30% more just to get by in remote rural Scotland than in urban parts of the UK and anti-poverty policies do not currently reflect this reality.

On October 4th, 2024, 96 people attended the Poverty Alliance's annual online event focused on challenging rural poverty in Scotland, which kicked off Challenge Poverty Week. This event was an opportunity to learn about poverty in rural Scotland, identify opportunities for change, explore how we can strengthen our rural anti-poverty movement, share learning from efforts to build lived experience into rural anti-poverty work and discuss how we can develop this practice.

1. Introduction

It is not right that it costs 15-30% more just to get by in remote rural Scotland than in urban parts of the UK. We know that if you live rurally, it's likely you must travel further to access jobs and services but have less access to public transport; use more energy to heat your home but pay more for it; and have less choice about where you do your weekly shop, which costs you more. Measurements of poverty can obscure rural poverty, meaning it is often hidden and not a key focus for policymakers, and stigma associated with asking for help can be more pronounced in rural areas. We need to put this right. This is why the Poverty Alliance kicked off Challenge Poverty Week 2024 with a national, online event focused on challenging rural poverty in Scotland. The event was organized by the [Taking Action on Rural Poverty](#) (TARP) project team which is funded by The Robertson Trust. It was an opportunity for people to come together to raise our voices against the injustice of poverty and show that collective action based on justice and compassion can create solutions.

2. Identifying Opportunities for Change

The first part of the event provided an opportunity to learn about poverty in rural Scotland, identify opportunities for change and explore ways to strengthen our rural anti-poverty movement. We heard from Izzy Grahl, a member of the Argyll and Bute Citizen's Panel about the unjust costs of rural living; Nicky Bowman from the Poverty Alliance shared [key learnings from the project's first year](#); Kate Anderson and Hannah Downey from Scottish Government talked about [plans to address rural poverty and the Rural Delivery Plan](#); and Artemis Pana from Scottish Rural Action delivered a presentation focused on [opportunities for change](#). Attendees then joined small group discussions to identify priorities for change. Key themes to emerge are described below.

Increase Incomes

Much discussion focused on ways to increase incomes for people living rurally including through addressing stigma to remove barriers to accessing support. Priorities for UK and Scottish Government included the implementation of a more progressive tax system, the implementation of a Minimum Income Standard or Minimum Income Guarantee, and creating more good quality jobs in rural areas that offer the Real Living Wage or higher. Barriers related to public transportation and digital connectivity were identified as needing to be overcome to allow people to access better paid local employment opportunities.

Increase Support to Third Sector Organizations

Attendees expressed the need for continued support for the third sector, in particular longer-term funding for these much relied upon organizations in rural areas. Challenges resulting from unreliable funding such as short-term project funding, having multiple small funding pots and competition for funds were described.

Evidencing need was a challenge faced in remote rural areas, where small numbers and dispersed poverty can make gathering data hard.

A perceived lack of understanding of rural living with policy making in Government was apparent. People described that Government don't always seem to 'get' the rural premium, and feeling frustrated when national policies and funding are rolled out with the assumptions that people in remote, rural and island parts of Scotland have the same access to services as urban areas. The need for rural proofing policies was deemed essential and the use of 'place' impact assessments was proposed to help to counteract urban bias.

On the other hand, some attendees reported feeling frustrated that Scottish Government are already aware of the challenges facing rural communities because they are not seeing enough action, despite multiple paper strategies and lots of talking. The need for action was emphasized and attendees cautioned against over-consultation. A review of existing consultations was recommended, including using existing evaluation reports from Third Sector organizations to aid learning about what works.

The Need for Locally Led Initiatives

The importance of hearing from lived experience and listening to the needs of communities, including what's not working, was a theme that was reiterated: initiatives must come from the people and need to happen at a local level to have impact and be locally led. Strategies proposed to achieve this included implementing community wealth building policy, mechanisms and structures; reviewing how funds could be deployed directly to communities; focusing on areas where local people do have power and co-producing with them; and supporting communities to develop action plans.

Accessing Essential Services

Accessing 'the basics' was prioritised i.e., food, housing, warmth, and health services, including developing affordable rural digital connectivity to increase ability to access services remotely where possible.

Barriers to accessing healthcare and specialist support services included long journeys, patchy support, poor transport infrastructure, poor accessibility for wheelchair users, and a lack of awareness around eligibility and entitlement to transport costs for health appointments. A review of available support for transport-healthcare was proposed.

The impacts of poor transport infrastructure on accessing essential services and community supports were also raised. Barriers created by cost and accessibility including the recent rise in train fares, the decision not to include free transport for asylum seekers in the Program for Government in 2024, and a lack of awareness of entitlements such as the disability bus pass were all mentioned. Specific concerns were raised for people living on traveller sites, where facilities may already be lacking, sites may be even further from services, and mainstream solutions may not be suitable e.g., having to leave behind family and community to be re-housed elsewhere if you have a disability.

Energy was described as representing a 'huge unfairness' because people shouldn't be having to choose between heating and eating. We heard that people cannot get partial oil refills and fuel is unaffordable for many, particularly those in homes that are off the gas grid and not well insulated. Priorities included standardising electricity charges so that people on a low income are not paying more for electricity in some areas and working with national grid providers to prevent limitations on feeding into the system through solar.

Other priorities raised included childcare, which was described as a critical issue requiring investment, with attendees reporting struggling to find flexible solutions that have a significant impact; access to affordable food; affordable and wheelchair accessible homes; and the continually increasing cost of studying creating a barrier for people on lower incomes.

3. Building Lived-Experience into Rural Anti-Poverty Work

The second half of the event focused on learning from efforts to build lived experience into rural anti-poverty work shared by Becky Hothersall from the Poverty Alliance; Kirsty Ngala from the Aberdeenshire Citizen's Panel; and Annette Johnston from Aberdeenshire Council. Attendees then rejoined small groups to discuss strategies and approaches to develop this practice.

Some attendees acknowledged that it can be hard to build lived experience into their work and to do this well. Some had had mixed results from their efforts, and stigma was described as a barrier to engagement. Tips shared to support and improve this practice are summarised in Image 1.

The importance of time and continuity to let trust and relationships develop was emphasized, though this wasn't always felt to be well understood by funders. A collaborative approach, reciprocal arrangement, transparency about what is realistically achievable and ensuring that the work is based on the goals of the participants were recommended. Ultimately, group led initiatives were deemed more effective than those prescribed by professionals and the need for projects run in, for and by communities was stressed again here.

Building LIVED EXPERIENCE into your practise

What did people tell us about what works for incorporating lived experience into thier work?

STRATEGY
Have a plan about what your lived experience of poverty voice will be used for, how will it influence and make change happen?

ACCESSIBILITY
Have a variety of ways that people can participate including anonymous options. Be flexible to people's needs.

TONE
Take a down to earth, welcoming, non-corporate approach, avoiding jargon.

VALUE
Value people's input, through renumeration and ensuring they get feedback and understand the outcomes of their contribution.

Image 1: Building lived experience into practice.

4. Identifying Practical Solutions to Reduce the Rural Poverty Premium

TARP is a 3-year systems change project funded by The Robertson Trust and taking place in Aberdeenshire and Argyll and Bute. A key aspect of the project will be piloting two local, practical interventions in each local authority area to reduce the rural poverty premium, with small seed funding to invest, and learning and evaluating as we go. We will then work together with the wider community to share lessons and advocate for the local or national change to the rural poverty premium that supports that reduction. In our final breakout room discussion, we asked attendees to share examples of local practical change to lower the cost of living that they would like to see invested in. Key themes are described below.

Overarching Considerations
The importance of recognising the specificity of solutions to different locations was highlighted and the importance of local, rather than national, projects was emphasised to support local community development. Funding a project that addresses the interconnectedness of the issues that matter was also proposed. For example, if a transport initiative was being funded, it should focus on the connection with another issue, such as accessing healthcare. We were reminded that fair funding for the third sector is vital to any model that makes things function in rural areas.

Fuel Poverty
Some attendees suggested investing in fuel purchase co-operatives that offer options for bulk purchases for several homes: this would meet the minimum purchase requirement of companies while making the cost more manageable for families. An example of a promising practice was the Northern Ireland Housing Executive who run social housing and promote an oil buying club to reduce prices.

Food

Suggestions to address food insecurity included funding training for communities to be able to set up collectives for food or other purchases, and funding pantries to reduce food costs. The Incredible Edible model was highlighted – a community movement encouraging people to grow fruit, vegetables and herbs in public spaces for anyone to pick for free.

Increasing Income
Funding for resources to support employers to pay the Real Living Wage was proposed, as was a pilot to assess the impact of paying the Real Living Wage or volunteer expenses on what support a service can bring to a community.

Childcare
Suggestions specific to childcare included a childcare pilot that is open to unemployed people to be become self-employed childminders, and to consider pooling services e.g., to offer early years childcare at a school rather than at a childminder with a self-directed care model applied to make this affordable.

Healthcare

Offering pre-op screening appointments more locally at GP surgeries and local hospitals was suggested to assist with accessing healthcare appointments.

Housing
Consultation with Housing Associations who have good ideas about how to support rural tenants was recommended.

Social Isolation
Initiatives that can support people who are isolated and falling into poverty were recommended. Attendees reported foodbanks seeing lots of new clients who are older, highlighting a need to bring people together to access wider support. Due to perceived stigma around accessing foodbanks, social clubs that target isolation and provide food may increase take up.

> **About us**
> The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.