

'Speak up, Speak out: Communities and the Cost of Living Crisis'

The Poverty & Inequality Commission for Scotland: Based on a presentation given by Bill Scott, Chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission for Scotland to the *Concept* seminar, March 2023

“Tackling child poverty is a national mission - it is not something the Scottish Government can do alone, and it takes all of us to deliver the change needed” - Nicola Sturgeon MSP, former first minister

The current Poverty and Inequality Commission was created by the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. MSPs of all parties voted unanimously for its creation, and the adoption of statutory targets to reduce child poverty. The Commission came fully into being in July 2019, when it replaced the previous, non-statutory, Commission in place between 2017 and 2019. The Commission are, in government parlance, an 'advisory non-departmental public body'.

Our statutory duties are -

- To provide **advice to Ministers** on the Scottish Government's child poverty delivery plans and any matter relating to poverty and inequality
- **To scrutinise annual progress** towards Scotland's statutory child poverty targets and advise on what further progress is needed
- **To promote** the reduction of poverty and inequality in Scotland

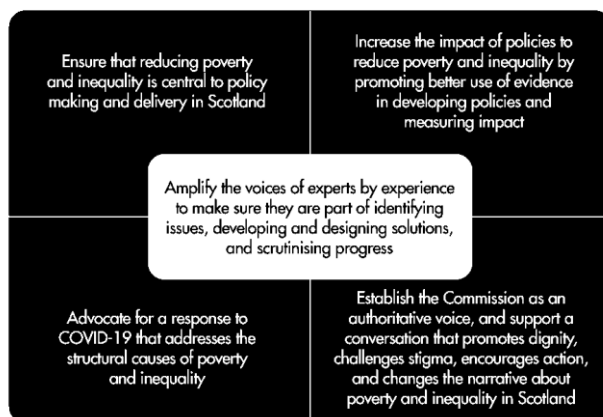
Simply put, our work can be summarised as: **advice**, **scrutiny**, and **advocacy** on poverty and inequality.

The Commission has up to nine members including a chair and, currently, two vice-chairs who job-share. We are a mix of people with lived experience of poverty, campaigners against poverty, and researchers. We include a refugee, a wheelchair-user and a single parent. All of us fulfil our duties on a part-time basis. At our earliest meetings, we adopted a set of values which set out how we intended to go about our work:

- **Courageous and honest:** Say what is right, not what is easy. Drive progress and change by providing constructive challenge.

- **Evidence-based:** Use evidence, from statistics and from people’s testimony, to inform, scrutinise and monitor progress.
- **Listening and accessible:** Be visible, accessible and available. Listen to those who wish to be heard, especially those with expertise and direct lived experience of poverty and inequality.
- **Promoting dignity and respect:** Tackle the stigma and discrimination associated with poverty.
- **Vocal:** Speak up for and amplify the voices of people who are not often heard.
- **Person-centred:** Keep people, their lives, their potential, and their individuality at the centre of what we do.

As well as these values, we also adopted five priorities which describe what the Commission has been focussed on in advising, supporting, and challenging partners.



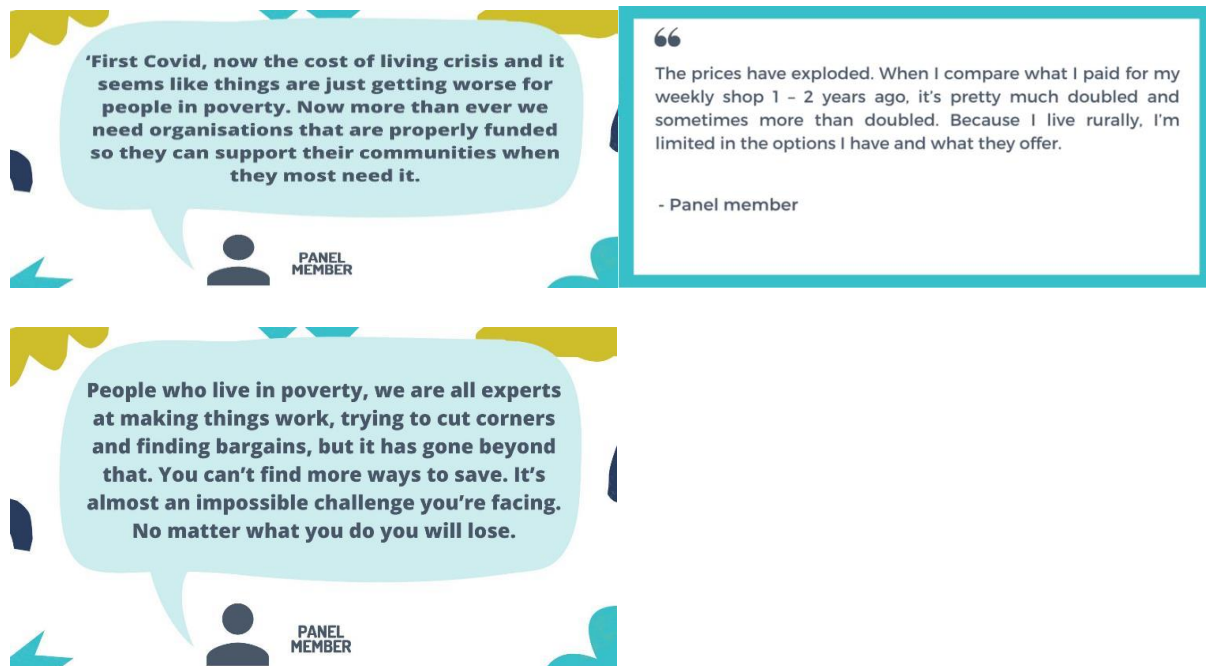
More about these priorities and how the Commission will know if we have made progress against them, is included in our [2020-23 Strategic Plan](#)

Our **Experts by Experience Panel** was established nearly two years ago. The Panel is made up of 16 people (originally nineteen, but people’s lives change and ongoing participation can become more difficult) from across Scotland who have lived experience of poverty. The Commission works with the Panel to identify issues and develop advice and scrutiny on poverty and inequality. The Panel are now involved in all aspects of the Commission’s work from attending meetings with Scottish Government Ministers to working groups and full Commission meetings. A mentoring scheme has also been established to encourage and support

Panel members who might wish to become members of the Commission or other public bodies in the future.

The Panel’s involvement is viewed as crucial to the Commission’s overall approach. Therefore, even though the initial funding for work with the Panel has finished, we intend to use the Commission’s own funding to recruit and work with a new Panel this autumn. You can read more about the Panel’s work [on the Commission’s website](#).

The Panel in their own words –



As well as the Child Poverty Act, there are other laws and duties which provide rights to an adequate income to Scots children and their families. These include -

- the Fairer Scotland Duty
- the Social Security Scotland Act (which states that “the Scottish social security system is to contribute to reducing poverty in Scotland”) and
- the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

There is also an outstanding commitment from the Scottish Government to incorporate UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD), Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Commission's work is informed by human rights considerations including the right to an adequate income.

Tackling Poverty and Community Learning and Development Values

In going about its duties, the Commission's work has also been informed and guided by Community Learning and Development values.

- **Self-determination** – In working with people living in poverty we have always tried to respect and value their right to make their own choices.
- **Inclusion** – The Commission recognises that, to tackle poverty effectively, we also need to tackle the other societal inequalities that help create and sustain it.
- **Empowerment** – The Commission firmly believes that the real experts about what works in tackling poverty are those living in poverty.
- **Working collaboratively** – Tackling poverty cannot be done by Scottish Government alone: it also needs action by local government, the Third and Private Sectors right down to grassroots local community initiatives.
- **Promotion of learning as a lifelong activity** – The Commission does not believe that our learning ends when we leave school, college or university. People learn from their own lived experience and we can all learn from one another. The Commission's Experts by Experience Panel is an attempt to bring that learning into our work

The Child Poverty Targets

The Child Poverty Act's Child Poverty Reduction Targets are that by 2030:

- less than 1 in 10 Scottish children should be living in poverty
- less than 1 in 20 should be living in persistent poverty

Yet currently, six years after the Act was passed, 1 in 4 children live in poverty and 1 in 6 children still live in persistent poverty.

Scottish Government have also identified certain **Priority Families** who are at a Higher Risk of Poverty. These include:

- **Households containing disabled children or adults** - 100,000 children in poverty (42%)
- **Lone Parent families** - 90,000 children in poverty (38%)
- **Black and Minority Ethnic families** - At almost twice the risk of poverty
- **Large families (+3 children)** - 77,000 children in poverty (32%)
- **Families with child under 1 year old** - Family type most likely to enter poverty
- Poverty is also gendered. Women are at a substantially greater risk of poverty than men. Women are also more likely to have to rely, wholly or partially, on means-tested benefits than men. Even in relatively affluent households, women can still be living in poverty because of how income is distributed within the home.
- **Poverty and the Cost-of-Living Crisis**
- The current, “Cost of Living”, crisis in Scotland and the rest of the UK is one that threatens the health and wellbeing of people and communities, and needs emergency response of the same scale and urgency as the COVID-19 pandemic.

From published evidence, and from what the Commission has heard from people and organisations it has spoken to, we are deeply worried that millions more children and families across the UK will be swept into poverty and debt as a result.

Many of the powers to act on the crisis lie with the UK Government, but the Commission believes that the Scottish Government must use all of the powers and resources available to it to mitigate the crisis’ impact.

Commissioners have been visiting grassroots organisations to hear the impact of the cost of living crisis on them and people they support. We have heard:

- **Demand for services is rising** and some report a change in the profile of people seeking support as people previously above the poverty line are being drawn into poverty and debt.
- **Costs** - people are unable to afford basics including food, fuel, energy and transport.
- **Mental health impacts** - the cost of living crisis is potentially becoming a mental health crisis as stress, anxiety and depression rises.
- **Knock-on effects on staff and volunteers** who are experiencing cost pressures and stress too in being unable to help people even when they are suicidal with worry.

The impact of the Cost-of-Living crisis on those living in poverty cannot be over-emphasised. For example, although inflation has impacted on the living standards of a huge proportion of our society, its impact on the poorest households is disproportionately high.

The Resolution Foundation estimates that the inflation rate for the poorest 10% of households is 12.5%; in contrast, for the richest 10% it is 9.6%. Food Inflation in the UK reached an all-time high of 16.8% in Dec. 2022 but, for basic items, which poorer households rely on more, food inflation is around 20%.

The latest research by the Food Foundation, **released in May of this year, shows a rapid 57% jump in the proportion of households cutting back on food or missing meals altogether in just three months. In April, 7.3 million adults lived in households that said they had gone without food or could not physically get it in the past month, which included 2.6 million children. This is compared with 4.7 million adults in January, itself a higher number than at any point during the Covid pandemic.**

Similarly, households paying around £1,000 for energy in 2021 will be paying an average of £2,400 pa from April 2023. However, lower income households, who predominantly pay via pre-payment meters, are paying even more. Moreover, because a high proportion of low-income households are in fuel debt, they are paying to reduce that debt before they get any additional heat or light.

The consequences of fuel poverty will be higher levels of ill health and premature death. In Scotland, ambulances were called out to 800 people suffering from hypothermia between 1st and 18th Dec and that was just the first of a series of colder spells in the last winter.

Last summer, the Scottish Government asked the Commission to provide rapid advice on how it should respond to the Cost-of-Living crisis. We provided advice which emphasised that Scottish Government should:

- In the **short term, focus on cash-first, direct financial support.**
- Concentrate efforts on **groups who currently miss out on or receive limited support** such as larger families, unpaid carers, disabled people, those just above the benefits thresholds and off-grid households.

- Begin action on key longer-term issues (e.g. improving free-school meal uptake, Council Tax reform) **to break out of the cycle of lurching from crisis to crisis.**
- To **increase the Scottish Child Payment** and double the 'bridging payment' for it.

In October 2022, the First Minister announced that the final Scottish Child Payment 'bridging payment' was indeed to be doubled to £260, and that the payment itself was to be increased to £25 a week for every child entitled to it.



Unfortunately, the Cost-of-Living crisis is by no means over. Food price inflation is still very high and energy prices remain over double what they were just 2 years ago. Yet much of the assistance provided by the UK Government has ended, even though an increasing number of families cannot afford the necessities of life. Thus, the Commission continues to believe that urgent action is needed to help households weather the cost of living crisis. The Commission will therefore:

- Continue to speak to people living in poverty and the organisations that support them
- Take what we hear, and use the Commission's platform, to bring these findings to Ministers in the Scottish Government
- Advise the Scottish Government and advocate for solutions to the crisis that are informed by and developed with people living in poverty

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The cost of living crisis is impacting, and will continue to impact, our basic human rights to an adequate standard of living – access to food, housing and heating – health, education and much much more.

- Zahada (Experts by Experience Panel member)

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What more could be done?

There are a number of areas in which campaigning and local action might result in strategies that reduce the pressure on low-income families. These include:

- Current benefit levels are inadequate and help with fuel costs is going to be withdrawn from all but the poorest households. What more pressure could be put on both the UK and Scottish Governments to do more?
- Scotland produces over 90% of the energy it needs from renewables but this has not resulted in lower electricity prices for poorer Scots households. Why? What could be done about it?
- Local authorities and regional health boards must produce joint Local Child Poverty Action Reports – are there opportunities for local groups to become involved in shaping local action?
- Only 60% of pensioners entitled to Pension Credits claim them, take-up of Free School Meals fell last year as did the numbers claiming Council Tax Reduction. Could a Benefits Take-Up campaign help?
- School meals debt results in children going without food. Some local authorities have written off such debts. Could the rest also do so?
- Could other public debts (for example council tax debt) be written off or collection postponed?
- The Food Foundation say that supermarkets aren't doing enough to assist low income families access affordable food. How could we put pressure on them to do more?