

About this session

Session 2 of the Shetland Partnership Plan development process took place on Thursday 25 June 2026 at Mareel, Lerwick. The Session was also open to online attendees. In total, 52 people attended in person and 11 joined online, representing 63 participants across the session; another strong turnout.

Participants were drawn from across Shetland's statutory organisations, Community Councils, Community Development Organisations and third sector bodies. Representation was from across the islands, including some of the outer islands.

The theme of the Session was **inequalities in Shetland**, the first of the thematic Sessions in the process, and one that will continue as a thread running through every subsequent Session.

What happened on the day

The Session was structured across five parts.

It opened with a brief reflection on the current Shetland Partnership Plan; what the indicators show, what has worked, and what the work ahead looks like. This was followed by a short reflection on the Seven Children: Olivia, George, Freya, Harry, Carrie, Lewis and Lottie, the seven fictional but evidence-based children whose stories sit at the heart of the process.

One of the main parts of the Session was an inequalities presentation, designed and delivered by **Chris Sewell, Area Commander and Chief Inspector, Police Scotland (Shetland)** and **Susan Laidlaw, Director of Public Health and Child Commissioner, NHS Shetland**. Both are members of the Shetland Partnership's Management and Leadership Team. The presentation drew on a [detailed evidence paper](#) prepared ahead of the Session and covered Shetland's headline statistics alongside the less visible picture that sits underneath them. It examined cost of living pressures, in-work poverty, fuel poverty, food insecurity, debt, loneliness, the geography of this and the specific challenges faced by particular groups including young people, older people, disabled people, and women. There was an opportunity to hear about the work of some partners to tackle inequalities: such as [Winter Payments](#), working with UK Government to [reduce energy costs in areas with curtailed wind](#), and the [Local Employability Partnership](#).

Participants were split into seven breakout groups (six in-person, and one online) for two rounds of structured discussion. The first asked participants to reflect on what they had heard and share observations. The second was more focused on practical questions: what roles people are playing in their communities, who is being missed, and what could be done differently.

The Session closed with a brief plenary where each group shared a headline point from their discussion, before closing remarks from the session chair, **Gary Robinson**.

What the evidence told us

Shetland performs well on many of the measures that national tools use to assess inequality. Employment rates are among the highest in the UK. Child poverty is the third lowest of any local



authority in Scotland. Crime is the lowest of any local authority area in the UK. Healthy life expectancy is notably higher than the Scottish average.

But those figures do not tell the whole story.

One of the most important factors shaping inequality in Shetland is one that national data rarely captures: the cost of living here is substantially higher than in most other parts of the UK. Compared to an urban UK household, it costs up to 26% more to reach an acceptable standard of living in Lerwick, up to 33% more for households within commuting distance of town, and up to 62% more for households in the most remote parts of the islands. Higher food and goods prices, significantly higher energy bills, and the cost of travel are the three main drivers.

This means that Shetland's income figures, which look reasonable by national standards, are quietly misleading. A household in Lerwick with a median income is not in the same financial position as a household with the same income in a Scottish city.

The evidence also highlighted the scale of in-work poverty. The average debt case handled by Citizens Advice Shetland in 2025/26 was £11,088, significantly higher than the Scottish average of £6,526. Around 20% of those cases involved someone in full-time employment. In 2025/26, 1,620 people were supported by the food bank, with around 22% of those being children under 16.

Energy costs are a particular and persistent burden. There is no mains gas in Shetland. The current energy price cap for a typical UK household is £1,641. For a Shetland all-electric home, the equivalent is approximately £3,456, more than double. As a result, 40% of Shetland households were in fuel poverty in the most recent three-year average, the highest rate in Scotland alongside Orkney and the Western Isles.

Loneliness is a less visible but significant issue. Over half of 18–29 year olds reported feeling lonely in the previous two weeks in a 2021 survey. A fifth of all respondents reported sometimes feeling lonely. Loneliness is associated with increased risk of heart disease, stroke, depression, and earlier death.

What makes Shetland's inequality distinctive is that it tends not to look like inequality. There are no run-down estates, no visible concentrations of deprivation. Hardship is spread thinly across individual households, often hidden behind a culture of self-reliance. That makes it harder to identify and harder to address.

What the discussions showed

Across the breakout discussions, a number of themes emerged:

Knowledge and Understanding:

- About the issues is more widely understood than 20 or even 10 years ago, although surprises from the data still remain, such as levels of in work-poverty, debt, loneliness and how stigma exacerbates being able to provide solutions.
- Inequalities are experienced differently in different areas of Shetland, for example, higher levels of need in Lerwick, vs lack of service availability in more remote areas.



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Ways of Working:

- Partnership working around this needs to improve, as we are continuing to see problems. At the moment, capacity and resource constraints limit opportunities for preventative, outreach and relationship-based work.
- It is essential to understand the problem, know our local communities and our young people, and to have a common understanding of that – data is valuable, but it doesn't go far enough.
- Our community organisations know their communities, and play valuable roles (e.g. youth clubs, lunch clubs), although they may not always know how to support those in need and could broaden their roles and potentially do more, with support. It is important to be mindful of volunteer overload, the time required to maintain assets, and less community delivery of social events than in the past, so how can Community Council's and others be supported to support low-income households in their communities and counter-act loneliness?
- This is all set against a context of Shetland's culture of getting on with things.
- More inclusive models of support and consideration of the location of services, to reduce stigmatisation. Often universal services are the key to identifying need but they need support to follow this through as part of a more targeted universal approach.
- "Missingness" came up as a way of describing people who are not engaging with services, not attending, or not visible within existing systems.
 - Highlighting the need for proactive engagement work, including follow-up, outreach and earlier contact where possible.
 - Need often spans more than one service, highlighting the importance of clearer referral pathways and stronger links between services and the importance of asking broader questions around what else might be going on, rather than focusing only on the immediate issue being presented.
 - Barriers to access include assumptions that people know what support is available, where to go and how to access it meaning they can remain largely invisible within existing systems.
- A practical partnership approach to data sharing, to ensure concerns about vulnerable people are shared.
- The needs of those on a low income should inform policy and decision making; very often they are not the ones that are involved in their communities nor in decision-making.
- Potential greater role for the private sector: they create local jobs and help to support thriving communities and are a sector who could potentially do more e.g. sponsorship.



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Policy Interventions:

- Good quality employment is a long-term route out of low-income: supporting people into employment / better paid employment, and the required interplay between wellbeing, skills development, childcare, transport and digital connectivity is critical to reducing inequality. There is concern about limited progression in retail, hospitality and social care, for example, alongside future employment opportunities and workforce change.
- Is there learning from social policy in other, more equal countries, e.g. around childcare?
- Development of Compassionate Shetland: real-life stories to help normalise discussion of inequality and reduce stigma / increase awareness and understanding of what a realistic standard of living looks like / normalise lower-consumption lifestyles.
- Explore locally funded Minimum Income Guarantee approach, or Shetland allowance / uplift on benefits.
- Explore local option for those receiving benefits / concessions to voluntarily opt out in order for resources to be redistributed to those who need them most, such as bus fares, Northlink travel concessions, Islands Allowance.
- Explore a partnership passport: a single-application approach (including digital solutions) that would allow individuals to apply once for a range of grants, concessions, and support across multiple organisations, rather than navigating each separately.

Decision-Making:

- Resource Allocation: are resources being directed to the right priorities? Suggestions include: Should existing spend priorities be reviewed against today's challenges to ensure investment has the greatest impact? Could eradicating inequality in Shetland be the metric when choosing budget allocation? allocate local funding to a shared vision for the community? Use local funding for cash-first approaches rather than funding services? Support for more progressive funding models. Examples of priorities include: to address system failure and move to early intervention; funding to reduce household cost pressures such as housing, fuel and electricity; transformative levels of funding to tackle fuel and transport poverty.
- This also requires clarity about which organisations are best placed to undertake different roles and access different funding streams.
- Consider how to make the best of local funding, underpinned by a shared vision for that community. Can greater local democratic powers and decision-making over funding distribution be introduced?
- Explore role of large companies and organisations, able to out compete small local firms, for staff and wages, which may be widening inequalities.



Influence:

- Partnership approach to encouraging reduced levels of bureaucracy through national policy.
- Partnership approach to ensure best use of ring-fenced funding and external funding opportunities to improve local outcomes: *“Funders need to look at need in an area rather than numbers – context is everything”*.
- National benefit levels should be increased to compensate for cost of living (island impact assessed) to have a Shetland Benefits Allowance.

Some key points

At the close of the session, each table shared the key point from their discussion. Taken together, with the information above, these represent a useful starting point for the partnership to consider as the process develops.

- **A partnership passport:** a single-application approach that would allow individuals to apply once for a range of grants, concessions, and support across multiple organisations, rather than navigating each separately.
- **Harnessing private industry and existing community assets** more actively to solve problems, create access, and tackle loneliness and mental health alongside economic exclusion.
- **Understanding the population as individuals**, not just data points, with community workers and community groups having a key role in understanding their own neighbourhoods and the people within them.
- **Tackling energy costs at a structural level:** the view was put clearly that piecemeal, service-by-service funding efforts are dwarfed by the scale of energy poverty. The opportunity to unlock more affordable energy for Shetland households was highlighted as something that deserves serious attention.
- **Addressing 'missingness':** a concept describing people who have disengaged from services following a poor experience, and who are now invisible to current provision. Examples included people who stopped attending GP appointments or using libraries after feeling judged or dismissed. The question of how organisations can identify and re-engage these individuals was raised across multiple groups.
- **Redirecting resources to those who need them most:** including exploring whether people who do not need certain universal benefits could opt out, and whether allowances such as the Shetland Islands Allowance could be applied more equitably to support those on lower incomes.
- **Better joined-up understanding** across organisations and communities: more compassion for what people experience, a clearer picture of the barriers they face, and a more coordinated response.



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The following organisations were represented at this Session:

Bigton Collective
Burra & Trondra Community Council
Delting Community Council
Fair Isle Development Company
Feltar Community Association
Fetlar Community Council
Foula Heritage
Gulberwick, Quarff & Cunningsburgh Community Council
Gulberwick, Quarff & Cunningsburgh Development
Integrated Joint Board
Lerwick Community Council
NHS Shetland
Police Scotland
Sandness Development Company
Sandness & Walls Community Council
Sandwick Community Council
Sandwick Social & Economic Development
Scalloway Community Council
Scalloway Community Development Company
Scottish Fire & Rescue Service
Scottish Government
Shetland Amenity Trust
Shetland Arts
Shetland Charitable Trust
Shetland Community Benefit Fund
Shetland Islands Council
Shetland Recreational Trust
Skerries Community Council
Skills Development Scotland
Tingwall, Whiteness & Weisdale Community Council
University of the Highlands and Islands (Shetland)
Visit Scotland
Voluntary Action Shetland
Whalsay Community Council
Whalsay Krik Development Company
Yell Community Council
ZetTrans

