

Harnessing Council Data to Understand Unmet Need in West Lothian Council

Summary

The Improvement Service and West Lothian Council have worked together to develop an approach to identifying unmet need using a combination of publicly available and council held data. By bringing together these datasets, analytical insights, and local knowledge we have created a model to show the places where support entitlement is not reaching those in need. This is incredibly powerful information, as it goes beyond single datasets that tend to only show current uptake. While these are useful in identifying areas of poverty and deprivation, they are far less useful in terms of understanding where more could be done.

The approach brings together the assets and strengths of the two partners and other organisations to deliver simple, low cost, and - most importantly - actionable insights that will deliver support to those in need within West Lothian.

Methodology

The main benefit of this approach is its simplicity and scalability to other areas, both in terms of other councils and other service areas beyond child poverty.

The first step in the project brought together different datasets with the goal of developing a fuller and more holistic picture of child poverty than could be achieved by using any one indicator. The methodology combines council held data on free school meals, clothing grant, and educational maintenance data with children in low-income families data produced by HMRC/DWP. This required significant data cleaning and matching. By bringing these together we have produced an index, based on prevalence of each indicator within small areas, to show areas with high child poverty levels.

The next step in the process was to analyse these data to identify unmet need. This makes use of a linear regression model to show the relationship between the children in low-income families indicator, as a proxy for child poverty, and each of the council provided datasets. This is used to model expected take up of each of these council benefits and highlight outliers where data zones (roughly equivalent to LSOAs) are significantly higher or lower than anticipated according to the model.

Wow factor

According to our model, there were areas where uptake of council support was substantially lower than expected. In one area uptake of free school meals was 27% lower than anticipated. This had never been flagged using Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation or other data, because unmet need is usually hidden.

Synopsis

This project used data to better understand child poverty within West Lothian Council. By combining and analysing the data it provided greater insights than would otherwise have been available into areas of unmet need within the Council. Moreover, it has already been used to inform interventions.

Councils in Scotland are required to prepare local child poverty action reports (LCPARs) and report on these annually. Feedback on West Lothian Council's 2022/23 LCPAR highlighted the need to make better use of data to target support to those in need. An opportunity was therefore

identified to work with the Improvement Service (IS), the national body for local government improvement in Scotland, to work together to better derive value from the data that the Council hold. The objective of the project was therefore to identify how these data could be used to effectively target support from the Council.

First, a Child Poverty Index was developed. The index combines several data sources to give a holistic picture of poverty within the local area. This index was further developed to create 'the West Lothian Model of Understanding Unmet Need' to allow the Council to prioritise areas with lower-than-expected uptake of benefits that would improve household incomes for families with children.

The impact has been first to identify small areas within West Lothian where there are particularly high levels of child poverty, as well as areas of unmet need. Without this analysis, areas with unmet need would not be identified. For example, one area identified as having high levels of unmet need had never been highlighted as a location for focusing support previously, as it is not one of the 20% most deprived areas in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, the measure used by most local authorities. We know that there are pockets of deprivation even in the least deprived areas, and the model has helped identify the areas outside of the most deprived data zones where extra support is likely to have greatest impact based on this unmet need.

The analysis has had an immediate impact on informing decision making. West Lothian have been able to use the findings to target interventions such as door knocking campaigns, community outreach events, and work with local schools and other partners including the third sector.

The project depended on strong partnership working, both in terms of interventions, as outlined above, but in the analysis itself. Both West Lothian Council and the IS have specific skillsets, knowledge, and assets they brought to this project. The IS has a national perspective on good practice in use of data, as well as expertise in analysis. West Lothian hold data on their citizens, as well as local knowledge of the particular challenges and needs of their communities. Together we have combined these into a practical solution to support local decision making. We also believe this approach is scalable and the IS will work with other local authorities across Scotland to develop similar approaches for their areas.

What should LARIA members learn from your award entry?

The approach shows how value can be added from making use of data, and in a relatively simple way. Bringing together different datasets has allowed us to unlock far more useful insight than using any one dataset alone. The project also highlights the potential of the huge amount of data that local authorities gather and hold. This project used a small set of indicators, but there is potential to unlock more value from other data in a similar way.

In addition, it shows the value of analysis in producing insights. This doesn't need to be particularly complex, but the main benefit is that it is easily understandable and actionable for the service providers.

The approach also highlights the importance of working together in partnership and developing dialogue that allows policy issues and available data to be matched up. Often, we see a gap between the data experts, who may not be sure how to apply their analysis and data, and the policy experts, who are not sure what data and analysis is available or how it can help. This

approach was a partnership from the beginning and developed through ongoing communication and dialogue.