

What Matters? Collecting, measuring, and using data that is meaningful to families in East Lothian - a collaborative agency approach to embed local lived experiences into local actionable policy.



How-to Guide

This guide offers more detailed information and advice for those who may be interested in adopting or adapting the initiative in their local area.

This document comprises the following sections (click hyperlink to skip to that section)

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Title	What Matters? Collecting, measuring, and using data that is meaningful to families in East Lothian - a collaborative agency approach to embed local lived experiences into local actionable policy.
Lead Organisation	East Lothian Council.
All Organisations	East Lothian Council.
Category	Promising – early signs of impact.
Poverty Impact	Enhancing understanding.
Introduction to the Project	
The Project, 'What Matters? Collecting, measuring and using data that is meaningful to families in East Lothian' is a Test of Change for East Lothian Council. The Poverty Prevention Project aims to bridge a current knowledge gap related to individuals with lived experience of poverty through the identification of families and individuals who have been missed by poverty support services. The data collected by the project is shared with collaborative organisations to further develop data collection and analysis methods. It is hoped that this approach will add to current knowledge around poverty impactors and develop a shared preventative poverty model between partner agencies.	

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Initial Idea

Who had the initial idea?	Team effort derived from The Children’s Services inspection feedback which suggested changes be made to current service delivery.	
How did the idea for the project come about?		
The initial concept emerged during the development of the local Poverty Plan, following a service self-assessment exercise supported by the Improvement Service to help systematically address the identified challenges.		
Were plans informed by any published reports / papers / research evidence or practice from elsewhere?	Yes	
The project drew on research conducted by local authorities across Scotland to help identify core issues and baseline challenges. Supported by Child Poverty Practice Accelerator Fund (CPAF) funding, the team engaged with wider CPAF-funded councils and reviewed evidence from multiple research sites to inform the project design.		
Was anyone else involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	No	
Were those with lived experience of poverty involved in developing the initial idea of the project?	Yes	
The project appointed a team member with lived experience of poverty to attend key project meetings. This ensured that any decisions made were reviewed through the lens of potential service users with lived poverty experience.		

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Was funding required to support the development of the initial idea of the project?		Yes
How was the project funded?	The same funding was used to develop the idea and pilot the project.	
Which organisation provided funding?	Scottish government.	
How much was required?	Child Poverty Practice Accelerator Fund.	
What was the specific source of funding?	£80,000.	
Were specific resources – other than funding - needed when developing the initial idea of the project?		Yes
Staff/Volunteer Time	- Volunteers were employed as an experience learning exercise to provide volunteers with new employability skill sets. - Council staff were also utilised as part of their wider Council work remit.	
Facilities / Workspace	N/A	
Equipment	The project used a system called SIGNAL, a new piece of equipment for the Council.	
Local Knowledge	The project utilised the experiences and insight of local individuals and families with lived experience of poverty.	
Food and Drink	When meeting with volunteers the Project Team provided refreshments.	
Did any barriers have to be overcome when developing the initial idea of the project?		Yes
The project, during its development and in deciding which direction it should take, faced economic, structural, and social barriers. These barriers resulted in the project losing focus with work continuing without a clear understanding of the project's ultimate direction.		

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Did anything in particular enable development of the initial idea of the project?	Yes
Collaborating with third-party organisations helped identify key challenges and secured additional project funding.	
How long did it take between having the initial idea and starting the project?	Nine to twelve months.
Who made the decision to introduce the project?	Formal approval was granted by East Lothian Council's Head of Service, following prior endorsement from all key project partners.

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Early Development

Was there a pilot project or feasibility study or test of change?	Yes, this is a pilot project.
What did the Pilot Project involve?	
Engaging with communities, and data collection and measurement for future Project implementation.	
Who was responsible for the Pilot Project.?	
• Lucy Higginson, ELC. • Maureen Allan, CEO VCEL. • Kat Burke, NHS Partnership and Place Team.	
Were those with lived experience of poverty among those involved in the design or delivery?	Yes
• A Lived Experience Coordinator was employed to work with different organisations and individuals to garner data. • Two lived experience panels – Working for Change Collective and Growing and Changing were also involved in developing the work and needs.	

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Was funding required to support the Pilot Project.?		Yes
How was funding provided?	The same funding was used to test the design, and to implement the project thereafter.	
Which organisation provided funding?	Scottish Government.	
How much was required?	£80,000 over 2 years.	
What was the specific source of funding?	Child Poverty Accelerator Fund	
Were specific resources – other than funding - needed for the Pilot Project.?		Yes
Staff/Volunteer Time	Volunteers were recruited as part of an experiential learning initiative designed to build new employability skills, while existing council staff contributed as part of their broader work remits.	
Facilities / Workspace	N/A	
Equipment	The project used a system called SIGNAL.	
Local Knowledge	The project utilised the experiences and insight of local individuals and families with lived experience of poverty.	
Food and Drink	When meeting with volunteers the Project Team provided refreshments.	

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Was the Pilot Project. evaluated?	Yes
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Yes, an evaluation was carried out of the project and next steps were identified in line with the Scottish Government Funding.

What Matters to Families? East Lothian Partnership collects a vast amount of data. We have set out to explore what data actually matters to families, how we can embed this within service and policy design, and how we can build a robust Partnership lived experience network.

The project has transformed how East Lothian Council and Community Planning Partnership collects, uses and integrates lived experience data, with a particular focus on poverty and service accessibility. Key highlights of the project include:

Over 25,000 members of the community engaged with the project, including 10,000 children and young people. Partners contributed significant voluntary time and creativity to understanding the needs and priorities of our communities.

The project shifted from one off engagement to ongoing involvement, including:

- o Annual input from young people into the Children's Strategic Partnership to share their experiences and needs directly with decision makers.
- o Using Signal data to inform the decisions made by the Poverty Working Group.
- o Adapted meetings and ongoing changes to our language to ensure people can participate and understand fully.
- A Lived Experience Coordinator role was created, providing dedicated capacity and key learning for how to design this kind of role. Whilst participation from the staff member ended unexpectedly during the project the strengthened partnership working was more adaptable. We consequently leaned on Signal integration and the development of a Community Listening Network.
- Lived experience contribution is now shaping strategic responses, not just informing background evidence.
- Tell Us Once/ No Wrong Door*
- The project strengthens the alignment between qualitative community insight and existing quantitative datasets, enhancing how services identify barriers and respond to community needs. One of these barriers is the limited ways that the Council shares information between services, resulting in people having to tell their story multiple times.
- The No Wrong Door initiative is aimed at preventing people from having to repeatedly share their stories by ensuring better initial triaging and data sharing between services. This is an ongoing project that will go beyond the CPAF timeline, key progress to date includes:

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- o The project evolved beyond its original scope and is now a significant, multi service transformation programme.
- o Multiple internal teams are contributing (digital, GDPR, revenues, comms, transformation, financial inclusion).
- o Early development work has laid a foundation for future customer facing use.

Take up of this project shows the readiness for broader systems change.

*To prevent any confusion with the national Tell Us Once service, we will adopt the name No Wrong Door for this project, while maintaining the full ambition behind its original concept.

Signal

Signal is an innovative, real-time data collection and insight platform that has significantly strengthened how East Lothian identifies, understands and responds to community need. Within the CPAF programme, it has played a central role in moving from fragmented and retrospective data collection towards a more integrated, person-centred and intelligence-led approach, where lived experience directly informs service design, delivery and improvement.

Over the past year, Signal has moved from concept into active delivery and integration across services and partnerships. This has included embedding the Signal Life Map within Community First, supporting consistent, strengths-based conversations with individuals and families across East Lothian, and using insight gathered to inform discussions within the Poverty Working Group. This has ensured that lived experience is not only captured, but actively shaping priorities and responses at a strategic level.

In practice, this approach is already improving outcomes for individuals. For example, through a single Life Map conversation, a parent experiencing financial hardship and poor mental health was able to articulate their full situation and priorities. This enabled coordinated support to be put in place—including income maximisation, wellbeing support and community connection—without the need to repeat their story, demonstrating the value of a more joined-up, relational approach.

Signal has also supported the wider ambition of a “No Wrong Door” approach, by improving how people’s experiences are captured and understood across services, reducing duplication and strengthening coordination. At the same time, it has strengthened collaboration between VCEL, third sector partners and statutory services, ensuring that insight gathered in trusted community settings informs wider system planning.

This collaboration has positioned VCEL and Community First at the forefront of data-informed, relational practice, ensuring that qualitative insight is captured in a structured way

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and used alongside quantitative data to provide a more complete understanding of people's experiences, barriers and outcomes.

At the heart of this approach is a clear principle: individuals should be in control of their own journey. Through the Life Map tool, people are supported to articulate what matters to them, identifying strengths, challenges and aspirations in a way that is both accessible and meaningful. The strengths-based nature of this approach ensures that each person's voice is heard and valued, fostering autonomy, dignity and self-determination, while supporting practitioners to deliver more consistent, person-centred support.

Through CPAF, Signal has demonstrated that lived experience data can be both structured and actionable, supporting a deeper understanding of complexity, improving coordination between services, and strengthening the link between individual experience and strategic decision-making. More than a data tool, Signal is acting as a catalyst for cultural and system change—ensuring that services across East Lothian are increasingly shaped around what matters most to people.

Community Listening Networks

Through the CPAF Project we piloted a new approach to understanding community's experiences through partnership working. We consulted with third sector organisations who have decades of experience engaging residents to coproduce a process and design the questions and facilitation materials.

We used Integrated Impact Assessments and Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments as a planning tool and to ensure that children's rights were centrally considered in our approach, and that we were designing the process around the needs of our least represented residents.

Over 120 organisations contributed to this engagement process, as well as sharing engagement data that had already been collected in response to a clear steer from communities to reduce duplication and only ask once. Its cross cutting nature ensures the learning influences multiple service areas simultaneously, including the following plans:

- Local Outcome Improvement Plan 2026-2036
 - Children's Services Plan 2026-2029
 - Participation and Engagement Strategy
1. People speak where they feel comfortable
→ Trusted local settings with trusted local people
 2. Those conversations turn into insight

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→ Themes, ideas, concerns—no identifying info.

3. Insight informs local decisions

→ VCEL shares summaries with key partners and groups.

4. Partners share back what's changed

→ Close the loop, build trust, do it again.

Was there evidence from the Pilot Project. that confirmed that it was working / it would work?

Yes

The cumulative, partnership based approach to community engagement piloted through CPAF has achieved significantly greater success than previous methods, providing clearer insight into community needs and directly informing the actions required. An additional benefit has been the strengthening of partnership relationships and increased partner commitment to the network approach.

Improving our approach has required a strategic improvement to engagement and coproduction. The process piloted through CPAF will be embedded in the East Lothian Community Planning Partnership Participation and Engagement Strategy which will continue to develop the Community Listening Networks.

A shared approach to community engagement and embedding lived experience provides a solid foundation for embedding qualitative data, but there is no one size fits all output or format for how this will look within service development or policies. We will continue to think creatively about how we combine these and use planning tools that have proven success like Joint Strategic Needs Assessments, Integrated Impact Assessments, Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments.

Data is collected according to history rather than function. The CPAF learnings have informed wider transformation projects around collation and sharing of data, which have been tied into the customer journey insights that have been gained through CPAF research.

Who made the decision to continue with the project beyond the xxx?

Co-Chairs of the Poverty Working Group – Eamon John, East Lothian Council Head of Communities and Partnerships and Kalonde Kasengle, NHS Lothian Partnership and Place.

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Was the design of the project proper modified following the Pilot Project.?

No

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Accessing the Service and Engaging with Service Users

Are potential users referred to your Service.?	Yes
The project is planning to use referrals in the future.	
Are there ways, other than referral, that are used to make potential users aware of your Service.?	No
Still in the process of development.	
What is the most common way through which users typically access your Service.?	
N/A	
Do you take steps to keep in touch / reach out to users?	N/A at this stage in the project.

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Working with People with Lived Experience of Poverty

Are those with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>delivering</u> the project?	Yes
The project includes an individual that has lived experience in specific meetings that are tailored to be appropriate for them.	
Are people with lived experience of poverty involved in <u>managing</u> the project or in project <u>governance</u>?	No
Are people with lived experience of poverty involved <u>in any other aspect</u> of the project?	Yes
Individuals with lived experience of poverty are involved in developing the project through sharing their experiences to help guide the project's focus long term.	

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Leadership, Governance and Partnership Working

Who is responsible for managing the project?	
Lucy Higginson - Policy Officer (Community Planning and Tackling Poverty).	
Is this the only responsibility of the person managing the project?	No
Lucy co-produces the Poverty Partnership, working alongside the Children's Strategic Partnership. Additionally, Lucy works with communities to help develop community priorities.	
What proportion of the manager's overall workload is given over to this project?	
About half of it.	
Is there a Project Steering or Advisory Group?	No
Who is involved?	
How does it work?	
Are any other governance arrangements in place to review strategy and performance?	No

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Links to Wider Policies, Strategies and Statutory Requirements

To the best of your knowledge, is the project aligned with national and/or local anti-poverty strategies and priorities (e.g., local authority or health board priorities)?	Yes
The project has found and gathered a lot of poverty data, while focusing on the general population. It has also gathered data internally from its Tell Us Once staff about minorities in the Council.	
In your opinion, has the project benefitted from being part of this anti-poverty strategy?	Yes
The project links to the Scottish Poverty Strategy through its multi-agency collaboration with other Scottish Councils and its participation in the CPAF Funding Programme.	
Is the project part of any other strategy?	Yes
• The Local Outcome Improvement Plan. • Children's Services Plan. • Community Engagement and Participation Strategy.	
In your opinion, has the project benefitted from being part of this anti-poverty strategy?	Yes
The Project has benefited by utilising the opinions and experiences of young people, through talking to other service providers, learning from mistakes made, and from what worked in the development and implication stages of the project's work.	
Is the project delivering a service that is a statutory commitment?	No

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Funding

Is funding used to support the work?		Yes
If no funding was used, would work benefit from funding?		
Has external funding been secured to support the work?		Yes
Which organisation provided funding?	The Scottish Government.	
What was the specific funding stream/source/scheme?	The Child Poverty Practice Accelerator Fund.	
How much funding was secured?	£80,000.	
For how long has funding been secured?	The Test of Change finished in March, 2026.	
Is future funding from the same external source a possibility?		No
Which organisations might provide funding?		
Is future funding dependent on achieving pre-agreed outcomes or outputs?		
What are these conditions?		
Has a specific sum been secured from your organisation to support this work?		No
How much funding was secured?		
For how long has funding been secured?		
Is future funding from your organisation a possibility?		No
Is future funding dependent on achieving pre-agreed outcomes or outputs?		
What are these conditions?		
What are the future - longer-term - prospects for this work if existing funding sources were no longer available?		

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No Wrong Door (Tell Us Once – changing to avoid confusion with national initiative) approach has been incorporated into the actions of our Local Outcome Improvement Plan under the poverty theme – Money Matters. This group links closely with another subgroup looking at Stigma Aware, Trauma Informed with Lived Experience

- GDPR, DPIA and consent wording is in development within East Lothian Council services.
- Procurement of a new Customer Case Management system is being informed by No Wrong Door approach to provide a relational triage approach.
- Improving referral processes between services and understanding of offer to reduce mis referrals.

Signal

Building on the foundations established through CPAF, the next phase of Signal development will focus on:

- Scaling adoption across partners

Expanding the consistent use of Signal across council services, health, and third sector partners to create a shared understanding of need and outcomes.

- Developing a shared outcomes framework and dashboard

Enhancing the ability to aggregate anonymised insights to inform planning, commissioning, and resource allocation at a system level.

- Strengthening integration with “No Wrong Door”

Ensuring Signal plays a central role in relational triage and coordinated support pathways, reducing fragmentation in the system.

- Embedding lived experience in continuous improvement

Using Signal insights alongside Community Listening Networks to create ongoing feedback loops that shape service design and policy.

- Supporting preventative and early intervention approaches

Using real-time insight to identify emerging need earlier and respond before issues escalate, particularly in relation to child poverty.

- Through this continued development, Signal will support East Lothian to move towards a more preventative, person-centred and intelligence-led system, where people’s experiences directly shape the services designed to support them.

Community Listening Networks

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- Embedded within Participation and Engagement Strategy which is expected to be published by the end of 2026.
- Projects using the network and approach including the Poverty Working Group – stigma and trauma research.

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Staffing and Resources

Do existing staff from your organisation contribute toward the work of this project?	Yes
Role: Finance professionals are able to help with funding calculations. Those running the free school meals provide catering for interviews and data-gathering sessions.	
Are existing staff from the host organisation paid extra (for example, taking on extra hours) to contribute toward the work of this project?	No
Extra hours worked: 0	
Have additional paid staff been employed to contribute toward the work of this project?	Yes
Role: Lived Experience Coordinator.	
Is the post permanent or fixed term?	Fixed term
Duration: 18 months. The Test of Change ended in March, 2026.	
Are volunteers involved in delivering the project??	Yes
Role: Over 25,000 members of the community engaged with the project, including 10,000 children and young people as this was dovetailed with the engagement for the Local Outcome Improvement Plan. They were involved in one to one discussions, focus groups, surveys, activity packs and accessible materials to give their views. Those engaged in the work would have had varying degrees of experience of poverty in their lives.	

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Are specific resources – other than staff/volunteer time and money - needed to support the delivery of the project?		Yes
Facilities / Workspace		
Equipment	SIGNAL - a tool that offers a practical approach to help people and services understand what matters, take action, and learn from real lives - was adopted to collect data.	
Local Knowledge	Community knowledge was utilised in developing the project.	
Food and Drink	Light refreshments for volunteers who may be going to interviews hungry, not having eaten.	
Are any of the resources needed to deliver the project provided in-kind, rather than budgeted from project funds?		No
Who provides:		
Were new IT systems, additional software, or upgrades existing software (databases, Apps) required to deliver this project?		Yes
Signal database was integrated into the project through TSI VCEL.		
Was additional training – for staff or volunteers - required to deliver this project?		Yes
Volunteers with lived experience of poverty received training from project staff members. This training was to help them understand the scope, aims and objectives of the project.		

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Monitoring and Evaluation

Do you – or other organisations - collect data on the project for monitoring or evaluation purposes?		No
Is there baseline data to describe what things were like before the start of the project?		No
Is the difference that the project is making measured or monitored by the host organisation?		No
Who within the host organisation is responsible for monitoring the impact of the project		
How often is the impact of the project monitored or measured by the host organisation		
What methods, techniques or strategies are used by the host organisation to impact of the project		
What information is collected by the host organisation about the project?		
Number of users		
Profile of users		
Experience of users		
Outcomes for users		
Anything else		
Has the data that has been collected by the host organisation been used to adapt the way the project works?		No

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Has an external organisation been employed to formally evaluate the project?		No
Who conducted the evaluation		
Details of the evaluation		
What were the key findings from the evaluation		
Has the data that has been collected from this evaluation been used to adapt the way the project works?		No
Is there an intention to employ an external organisation to evaluate the impact of the project in the future?		No
Is there an intention to undertake your own formal evaluation in the future to estimate the impact of the project?		No

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Impact

To what extent have the aims of the project been achieved?		Making progress with project in its development stage.
What difference has the project made?		
Not applicable as the project has not been implemented yet and difference cannot be ascertained at this early stage.		
Have conditions or demand changed since the project was introduced?		No
Has the project had the capacity to meet these changing conditions and demand?		N/A
N/A		
Has the project changed through time?		No
What changed		
Why has it changed		
Has the project had any unexpected or unintended outcomes?		Yes
There were a lot of unexpected and unintended outcomes, one being how to support the different roles. Also originally not having a Lived Experience Coordinator, was a significant oversight which led to one being appointed.		
In your opinion, is the project having an impact on tackling poverty?		No
Impact on poverty has not been evaluated at the current date so cannot answer this just now.		

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Learning from Experience

What is working well?	
- Gathering data. - Utilising existing Council staff to help with project development.	
What, if anything, is working less well?	
Organising the project proved problematic in the early stages. Understanding how to support all of the roles was also a challenge at the outset. It was not smooth sailing.	
What are the key learning points that you'd like to share with other practitioners?	
Key learning points have yet to be ascertained.	
Are there plans to develop or expand the project in the future?	No
How easily do you think this project could be replicated in another setting?	
Some of the elements of the project and the data would be highly replicable but it could be difficult as it has a high level of data specific to East Lothian Council.	

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