

The Level:

Policy Implementation and Alignment Note

How Scotland's Delivery Protocol for severe and multiple disadvantage can support existing policy commitments



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1. About the Level

The Level: Raising the Floor for No Wrong Door is Scotland's Delivery Protocol for turning existing commitments on prevention, reform, integration and No Wrong Door into consistent practice for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage (SMD). It sets a national floor while enabling local areas to decide how best to meet local needs.

Full protocol: **www.thelevel.scot**

It requires no new strategy or duty. It helps deliver existing commitments more effectively through:

- i. **Recognition:** that the Level is the operational tool for existing policy – including public service reform, prevention, health & social care renewal, No Wrong Door, Getting it Right for Everyone – with a focused application to people facing SMD.
- ii. **Mainstreaming:** that routine consideration of SMD is integrated into existing human rights, equalities and Fairer Scotland processes in relevant policy, funding and commissioning decisions.
- iii. **Implementation support:** that leadership development, evaluation, feedback loops and practical tools are considered so existing policy reaches the people currently failed by siloed systems.

People with SMD generate some of the highest human and public costs in Scotland. Every year, at least 1 in 28 adults (nearly 200,000) experiences extreme disadvantage; 28,800 experience two of homelessness, offending and substance use and 5,700 experience all three¹. A system able to hold complexity, maintain continuity and act early for people at the hard edges becomes more effective, more preventative and more resilient for everyone.

¹ Bramley, G., Fitzpatrick, S., Wood, J., Sosenko, F., Blenkinsopp, J., Littlewood, M., Frew, C., Bashar, T., McIntyre, J., & Johnsen, S. (2019). *Hard Edges Scotland: New conversations about severe and multiple disadvantage*. The Robertson Trust and Lankelly Chase.

2. Legal Framework Alignment

The Level does not create new duties. It helps existing legal duties work better together for people facing severe and multiple disadvantage as follows:

Legal Framework/Duties	Why it matters for SMD/The Level
Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act 2007	Places duties on councils and other public bodies to inquire, cooperate and protect adults at risk of harm. Many people at the hard edges meet (or sit close to) the three-point test. The Level supports earlier, joined-up action before harm escalates.
Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Act 2023	New duties on named public bodies to engage in release planning and to comply with national throughcare standards. Critical for the justice-housing-health interface that Hard Edges highlighted.
Community Justice (Scotland) Act 2016	Gives partners a clearer method to discharge the duty to collaborate to reduce reoffending and support victims, especially where justice involvement overlaps with housing, health and substance use needs.
Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018	Aligns with the recognition that domestic abuse is a pattern of behaviour across a person's life, not isolated incidents. It supports joined-up, trauma-informed responses for people also facing severe and multiple disadvantage, including those affected by coercive control and sexual violence.
Equality Act 2010 & Specific Duties (Scotland) Regulations 2012	Strengthens mainstreaming of equality in policy, funding and procurement decisions, and helps ensure people with overlapping protected characteristics and severe disadvantage are not missed.
Fairer Scotland Duty (Part 1, Equality Act 2010)	Requires certain public bodies to actively consider how to reduce inequalities of outcome caused by socio-economic disadvantage when making strategic decisions. The Level's checklists and tools are a practical way to discharge this for the group with the highest cumulative disadvantage.
Human rights & forthcoming Human Rights Bill	Provides a practical route to progressive realisation of rights for people most often failed by fragmented systems – through minimum standards and whole-person approaches.

Legal Framework/Duties	Why it matters for SMD/The Level
Housing (Scotland) Act 2025 – Ask and Act duties	Ask and Act aims to prevent homelessness. The Level aims to prevent severe and multiple disadvantage, which in turn reduces homelessness at the hard edges, where deep exclusion usually precedes housing loss. Guidance on the duties will support each relevant body and The Level shows how those bodies can join duties up in practice.
Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003	Local authority duties to provide care and support for people with mental disorder, plus cooperation duties. Directly relevant where mental health overlaps with substance use, homelessness and justice.
Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014	Creates the integration authorities and the duty to plan and deliver health & social care in an integrated way. The Level is a practical method for making that duty work for people with the most severe and overlapping needs.
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 (UNCRC)	Supports rights-respecting practice for children and young people at risk of, or already experiencing, severe and multiple disadvantage and helps prevent harm escalating into adulthood.

3. Policy Framework Alignment

The Level aligns with key policy frameworks as follows:

Policy Framework	Why it matters for SMD/The Level
Public Service Reform Strategy (2025) & Christie Commission	Delivers the “radically different approach to integration” for the group currently failed by silos. It is the reform delivery tool for the hard edges.
Verity House Agreement / COSLA	Supports a consistent national floor while protecting local flexibility and prioritisation.
Scottish Government Prevention Unit	Provides the secondary and tertiary prevention protocol for people already in or at high risk of SMD. An area of shared interest to build more understanding of how multiple risks interact across an individual’s life and different public services.
First Minister’s No Wrong Door commitments	Defines what No Wrong Door means in practice for people with complex, interlocking needs.
Health & Social Care Renewal / Population Health	Centres people with the highest failure demand and poorest outcomes, supporting SMD as a population health priority.
Whole Family Approach Child Poverty Strategy	Adapts the whole family approach for adults who are disconnected from traditional family support, with a focus on people at the hard edges. Preventing unmet needs among young people deepening into adulthood.
Equally Safe	The Level supports the ambitions of Equally Safe by providing practical tools to improve joined-up, trauma informed responses for women and girls facing violence who also experience severe and multiple disadvantage.
Programme for Government 2026-31	The Level supports commitments in the Programme for Government, including that a No Wrong Door approach should mean people “need only ask once” as well as the pledge to “rewire the Scottish state to ensure services fit around people, rather than expecting them to fit around a static system.”
Getting it Right for Everyone	Helps operationalise the framework by translating its multi-agency, person-centred principles into a concrete, trauma-informed response for people experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage.
Sector Specific Strategies²	Acts as connecting glue so single-issue strategies and standards do not continue to operate in isolation and can consistently extend to co-occurring needs in recognition of the common call for joined up working that is woven through these strategies.

² Including Preventing Harm, Promoting Recovery; Charter of Rights for People Affected by Substance Use; Ending Homelessness and Ending Destitution Together Plans; MAT and SHORE Standards; Distress and Alcohol Brief Interventions.

4. Closing the Implementation Gap

Evidence shows that closing the gap between policy and practice for people at the hard edges depends on a small number of enabling conditions. Scotland already has the legislative and policy ambition. The Level supplies the shared method and tools to turn that ambition into consistent delivery.

This table sets out what makes joined-up delivery work, where the gaps currently sit – and how The Level helps close them.

Enabler/Driver	Current Gap	How 'The Level' Helps
From Ambition to Practical Delivery	Scotland has strong high-level principles, but too few shared operational methods. Areas and sectors improvise or default to single-issue approaches. The lack of common tools across sectors and systems weakens relational continuity and trust.	Sets a national floor and role specific tools: Clear expectations that can be adapted locally – with Level Checks for practitioners, resource holders and policymakers – all designed to protect low-threshold, relational support.
Shared Language	Sectors describe the same people in different terms and measure success differently, so coordination stays at the surface level and people fall between gaps.	Provides a shared language: A ready-made, evidence-based SMD language and priority interventions that can be hardwired into whole-population or single-issue strategies, keeping SMD visible across systems.
Specific Commitments	Endorsements of prevention and joined up working rarely specify what must change for people whose needs cross multiple systems.	Clarifies commitments: The role-specific checklists and feedback loops move organisations from intent into visible, testable commitments on design, eligibility, funding, workforce and practice.
Leadership and Visible Accountability	Outcomes for people with SMD disappear inside aggregate performance data. Shared risk and responsibility across organisational boundaries remains ambiguous, so no one holds the whole journey. And true parity of esteem between lived experience, third and public sectors is rarely realised.	Makes SMD visible: In impact assessment, commissioning, local planning and outcomes frameworks so progress (or its absence) can be seen, compared and scrutinised. The national floor encourages all types of leaders to emerge and coordinate across boundaries and account for results together.

Enabler/Driver	Current Gap	How 'The Level' Helps
Adaptive Governance and Feedback Loops	Frontline learning and lived experience do not consistently influence policy and commissioning in real time. Systems routinely repeat the same design flaws.	Treats feedback as essential: Embeds feedback loops from practice and lived experience into commissioning and policy so the system can learn and adapt. Backed by leadership development to change organisational culture.
Proportionate, Cross-Sector Resourcing	Short-term, siloed budgets, high caseloads and rigid throughput targets default care away from time-intensive cases, defeating the principle of 'proportionate universalism ³ ' that Scotland aspires to – the delivery of universal services but with a scale and intensity proportional to the level of need.	Makes existing spend work harder: Focuses on reducing failure demand and encouraging longer-term, pooled and integrated funding models. Backed by economic analysis to justify long-term collaborative investment.
Permission and Protection	Practitioners can face compliance and inspection pressures that discourage flexible, cross-boundary working. Organisational territorialism can protect budgets and mandates at the expense of shared responsibility.	Joined-up by default: Provides a robust national floor that enables local areas to adapt locally while protecting local services from rigid, process-driven accountability. Actively encourages the loosening of territorialism in favour of joined-up approaches.

3 <https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/32777/proportionate-universalism.pdf>

5. Success Measures

Successfully implementing The Level can be tested by whether:

- ✓ People with SMD experience fewer repeated crises and greater continuity of support, with a reduction in failed handovers and gaps.
- ✓ People with SMD are more visible in local scrutiny and in national reform and prevention reporting.
- ✓ Earlier opportunities to intervene are identified and acted on, with fewer people with SMD reaching crisis point as a result.
- ✓ Decisions on policy, funding and services routinely assess impact on this group.
- ✓ Practitioners, funders/commissioners and policymakers use a common framework instead of parallel single-issue approaches.
- ✓ Efficiencies realised in the SMD response are protected and reinvested in continuity, workforce and early help.
- ✓ New strategies, standards and funding programmes routinely use or adapt The Level's language and checks.
- ✓ Frontline practitioners report less pressure from fragmented systems and greater ability to provide relational support.
- ✓ Resources are allocated proportionate to need.
- ✓ People with experience of SMD report greater trust, easier access and less need to retell their story.

These success measures track implementation. The fuller outcomes for people and services are set out in **The Level: www.thelevel.scot**