



# BRIEFING IN ADVANCE OF SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT DEBATE ON ADDRESSING CHILD POVERTY THROUGH EDUCATION

5 February 2025

## Introduction

Child poverty levels remain unacceptably high in Scotland, with 1 in 4 children locked in poverty between 2020 and 2023.<sup>1</sup> While the most effective way to reduce child poverty is to increase family incomes (including through investment in social security<sup>2</sup>), action to tackle child poverty must run like a thread throughout everything that government does, including in education.

Schools play a crucial role in addressing child poverty. While they can't single handedly 'solve' child poverty and should never be expected to, schools mitigate some of its impacts, help to reduce household costs, boost family incomes and support children on lower incomes to learn, thrive and achieve their potential. In this briefing, we highlight the policies needed to support schools in taking on this task while wider work happens to increase family incomes.

## Cost barriers to learning and the impact of poverty at school

Schools deal with the impact of poverty on their children and families every day. **The link between income levels at home and children's school experiences is clear.** In our recent Big Question survey,<sup>3</sup> over 5000 children and young people told us that to be ready to learn they need the basics: good sleep, warm homes, clothing, sufficient food, support and the avoidance of worry and stress. These are basics that children in poverty often can't access when their families are struggling to afford essentials. In a recent NASUWT survey,<sup>4</sup> 70% of teachers said they were aware of more pupils than ever lacking in energy and concentration; 62% reported more pupils coming to school hungry and 58% reported more attending in unwashed or damaged clothes. 70% have provided food or clothing to pupils on an ad hoc basis.

The cost of attending school adds pressure to stretched family budgets. **Children and their parents consistently report that where there are costs for uniforms, food, resources, clubs, fun events and trips it affects their ability to engage fully in their education, creating barriers to attendance, participation, and learning.**

<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government, [Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2020-23](#), 2024.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, sustained above inflation increases to the Scottish child payment. CPAG analysis suggests the Scottish child payment, even at current levels, is lifting around 50,000 children out of poverty. Increasing it to £40 per week would lift 15,000 children out of poverty and reduce the depth of poverty for many more children.

<sup>3</sup> CPAG in Scotland, [Cost of the School Day Big Question Report](#), 2024.

<sup>4</sup> NASUWT Scotland, [Child Poverty and Socioeconomic Disadvantage \(Scotland\)](#), 2024.

## Reducing the cost of the school day and addressing poverty

At CPAG in Scotland, with Scottish Attainment Challenge support for our Cost of the School Day project, we support schools and local authorities with resources, research and practical measures to reduce cost barriers for families on lower incomes.<sup>5</sup> We are privileged to work with children,<sup>6</sup> practitioners and parents to understand financial barriers and what is needed to remove them.

Through this, we see commitment, care and innovation in schools delivering free breakfast clubs, affordable uniform policies, resource stations, free clubs, inclusive fun events, digital lending, accessible trips, support to access financial entitlements, poverty aware communication and more. Local authorities are increasingly developing policies and guidance which can support their schools to drive forward these efforts.<sup>7</sup>

Practical measures like these don't only have educational benefit, they address the drivers of child poverty. **Schools can help to boost inadequate incomes by ensuring that families access entitlements like free school meals, clothing grants, education maintenance allowance and wider support.** When schools remove or reduce costs, they ease pressure on stretched budgets and avoid adding to high household costs faced by families. Action on the cost of the school day won't single handedly end child poverty but it makes an immediate and practical difference to the lives of children and families affected by poverty.

## Increasing family incomes is key

However, none of this should mean placing an unmanageable burden on schools already under huge pressure. **Any work to improve poorer children's experience of school will have limited impact while family incomes are inadequate.** Wider government action across social security, employment, housing and whole-family support is essential to reduce child poverty.<sup>8</sup>

## Further action needed to help schools address child poverty

If schools are to have a role in addressing child poverty, they need policies which support them and adequate resource. In recent years, **the strong focus on poverty and additional funding for equity in schools and local authorities through the Scottish Attainment Challenge, the extension of Universal Free School Meals to P1-5 and progress towards further expansion, the national minimum school clothing grant, guidance on affordable school uniform policies and resource for curriculum costs** have all helped. However, poverty related barriers at school are still holding children back and there is further to go.

Here are some examples of measures that would reduce school costs, help boost family incomes and support schools to address child poverty. For schools to play their part in breaking down barriers to opportunity, they must start from a secure and sustainable position. The following policy recommendations are not in place of, but must be in addition to, the adequate funding of the education system.

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<sup>5</sup> [Cost of the School Day Ideas Bank | CPAG](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Cost of the School Day Voice network | CPAG](#)

<sup>7</sup> For example, [Equity in South Lanarkshire | CPAG](#), [Tackling the cost of the school day - West Lothian Council](#), [Dundee City Council's Cost of the School Day | CPAG](#), [North Ayrshire Cost of the School Day](#)

<sup>8</sup> [End Child Poverty budget briefing 2025-26 | CPAG](#)

## 1. Universal Free School Meals

The cost of school lunch continues to put pressure on household budgets – particularly for those just above the means-tested threshold. 1 in 5 children *in poverty* in Scotland are currently missing out on a free school meal.<sup>9</sup>

The benefits of Universal Free School Meals (UFSM) are undeniable. 97% of young people say that having enough food at school is important in feeling ready to learn. Research continues to show that universal provision is progressive and helps tackle inequality.<sup>10</sup> It helps to boost school meal uptake for everyone.<sup>11</sup> Children and young people tell us that it removes the stigma of means testing and means that nobody slips through the net due to application barriers or embarrassment.<sup>12</sup> In an evaluation of the London Mayor’s Primary UFSM policy, 84% of parents and carers surveyed across the income spectrum said the availability of UFSM helped or significantly helped household finances. Families on low incomes are benefiting the most from the additional financial support, with money saved used for household essentials and additional opportunities for their children.<sup>13</sup>

We welcome progress towards expansion of free school meals to P6/7 children in families receiving Scottish Child Payment and the recently announced test of change expansion for S1-3s in 8 local authority areas. However, commitments to UFSM remain delayed. Schools currently work hard to provide food that’s needed through breakfast provision, fruit bowls, individual teacher ‘stashes’, free snacks, extra portions and dinner bags to ensure that no child goes hungry. To support children in poverty and alleviate the burden on schools, **universal free school meals must be extended to all in Primary 6 and 7 (as long promised) and into secondary schools** (with a potential stepping stone being the extension of free school meals to all families on universal credit or an equivalent means-tested benefit).

*“Free food for everyone, small, medium and large.” (Primary pupil)*

*“Free school meals - poverty doesn’t stop when children go from P7 to S1.” (Secondary pupil)*

## 2. Affordable school uniforms

Uniforms are one of the school costs that matter most to young people.<sup>14</sup> Although there is a national minimum school clothing grant, the grant level provided, eligibility criteria and application process varies by local authority, meaning that support received depends on where a family lives. **Action should be taken to increase the value of the payment and extend eligibility, such as making this available to all families in receipt of universal credit (or an equivalent benefit).**

<sup>9</sup> CPAG, [UK children in postcode lottery for free school meals](#), 2024

<sup>10</sup> University of Essex, [The impacts of Universal Free School Meals in England](#), 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Government [School healthy living survey: school meal uptake statistics 2024](#) - uptake for all school meals (free and paid for) is highest among pupils with universal entitlement to free school meals (P1-P5 72.4%; Special schools 78.0%) and lowest among pupils where access to free meals is means-tested (P6-P7 43.7%; Secondary schools 42.1%)

<sup>12</sup> CPAG in Scotland, [Cost of the School Day Big Question Report](#), 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Impact on Urban Health [More than a meal: an independent evaluation of universal primary free school meals for children in London](#), 2024.

<sup>14</sup> CPAG in Scotland [Cost of the School Day Big Question report](#), 2024.

Action is also needed to **monitor and evaluate implementation of the Scottish Government’s non-statutory guidance on school uniform and clothing policies<sup>15</sup>** to understand whether it is having the intended impact of cheaper uniforms and increased affordability for families.

### 3. School trips

Children and young people tell us that school trips offer new experiences, help them learn more and in different ways, have fun, feel included and to go places and try things they normally couldn’t. These experiences are especially valuable for children unable to access them at home. All these benefits are lost when children can’t afford trips or when schools stop running them because they are unaffordable. 68% of teachers in a recent NASUWT Scotland survey report that their school has been forced to limit trips due to cost.<sup>16</sup>

Previous manifestos<sup>17</sup> and Programmes for Government<sup>18</sup> committed to supporting schools to provide inclusive trips and activities for all, ensuring that less-well off families do not face costs for curriculum related trips and activities, that all pupils are able to attend ‘rite of passage’ trips, such as P7 residentials and that there is a minimum entitlement for all secondary pupils to attend at least one ‘optional’ trip during their time at school, and we are keen to see this commitment kept. **Local authorities and schools must have sufficient funding to move school trips from being an option for some to an entitlement for all.**

*“Have a funding scheme for those who will miss out, it’s not the child’s fault they can’t afford and it’s an inevitable issue so they [government] have to handle it better.”* (Secondary pupil)

*“Provide more funding to allow more educational and fun trips without the school thinking they can’t run trips as they’re too expensive for families.”* (Secondary pupil)

### 4. Financial inclusion and income maximisation in education settings

Schools and staff in essential roles such as Family Support Workers can help families access school based financial entitlements like free school meals, the school clothing grant and Educational Maintenance Allowance but can also offer referral pathways to advice on wider benefits. Approaches are inconsistent across different areas, but evidence<sup>19</sup> suggests that **specialist income maximisation workers within education settings benefits children and leads to increased incomes for families, a key factor in improving children’s educational outcomes.**<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> [School uniform and clothing: Guidance for schools and education authorities - gov.scot](#)

<sup>16</sup> NASUWT, [Child Poverty and Socioeconomic Disadvantage \(Scotland\)](#), 2024.

<sup>17</sup> Scottish National Party, [SNP 2021 Manifesto: Scotland’s Future, Scotland’s Choice](#)

<sup>18</sup> Scottish Government, [Programme for Government 2021 to 2022](#)

<sup>19</sup> Public Health Scotland, [Referral pathways to money advice in education settings - briefing](#), 2024.

<sup>20</sup> K. Cooper & K. Stewart, [Does Money Affect Children’s Outcomes? An update](#), 2017.

## 5. Involve children and young people in poverty and education policy development

From the classroom to the Cabinet, children's voices must be included in decision making. Pupil voice is a powerful mechanism for change in school<sup>21</sup> and children and young people's lived experience should inform education policy at all levels. The Cost of the School Day Voice network has over 300 schools signed up and its members want their voices to be heard at school, locally and in Parliament:

*"We are the ones experiencing it [school] and we know what we need."*

*"It's important to know what we think so teachers and the government can improve on things that are affecting people."*

*"We need to protect future generations from having the same problems so they can have a good start at their school life."*

## Conclusion

Schools play a powerful role in addressing child poverty, but we need action and investment to reduce cost barriers if they are to continue doing this without buckling under the strain. Alongside this, we need wider and stronger action across government to increase family incomes. Any ambition for education to improve outcomes for children affected by poverty will be hindered while high levels of child poverty persist.

## About us

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland works for the one in four children in Scotland growing up in poverty. We collect evidence from families living in poverty and campaign for solutions to bring about a society where children have a fair chance in life free from hardship. We provide training, advice and information on social security to frontline workers to make sure families get the financial support they need.

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<sup>21</sup> CPAG [UK Cost of the School Day evaluation](#) 2023