

The Cost of a Child in Scotland in 2025

December 2025

Summary

- *The cost of raising a child to age 18 is £250,000 for a couple and £290,000 for a lone parent.*
- *An inadequate social security system means many families, including some working full time, do not have enough income to cover the cost of a minimum standard of living.*
- *A lone parent with two children working full-time on the minimum wage can only cover 79 per cent of these costs, while a similar couple can only cover 90 per cent. The same families across the rest of the UK can cover 69 percent, and 82 percent, respectively.*
- *An out-of-work lone parent with two children only has enough income to cover 55 per cent of costs (46 per cent for a couple). The same families across the rest of the UK can cover 44 percent, and 37 percent, respectively.*
- *Scotland specific policies (most notably the Scottish child payment) help families but still many families are struggling to meet their minimum costs.*

Recommendations

1. **Invest in children's benefits** – *this will help both working and out-of-work families cover more of the costs of raising children, and is the best way to tackle child poverty. The key recommendation in the Cost of a Child in Scotland 2024 report was that the two-child limit needed to be scrapped. With the policy now abolished from April 2026:*
 - **the Scottish government should:**
 - **Increase the value of Scottish social security support for families, particularly the Scottish child payment** as the most direct and effective method Scottish government has of getting money into the pockets of low-income families and accelerating progress on child poverty. CPAG analysis suggests that increasing the Scottish child payment from £27.15 to £40 per week would lift an additional 15,000 children out of poverty at a cost of £190 million. It would also reduce the depth of poverty for many more and strengthen the protective buffer for families living just above the poverty line.
 - **The UK government should:**
 - **Abolish the benefit cap** – the UK-wide benefit cap limits the amount of benefits an out-of-work family (or a family working a low number of hours) can receive, pushing families into deep poverty. Abolishing the cap would ensure families unable to work are closer to meeting a minimum standard of living. The Scottish government currently mitigates the benefit cap, but if it was removed at the UK level, the Scottish government could spend this money elsewhere.

- **Invest in children via child benefit and the child element of universal credit.** *It is not just families affected by the two-child limit and benefit cap who are struggling. This would mean a wide range of families are able to cover more of their costs.*
- 2. Extend universal free school meals to all Primary 6 and Primary 7 pupils** – *The recent extension of free school meal entitlement to children in Primary 6 and Primary 7 who are in families in receipt of Scottish child payment is welcome, as is the piloting of extended eligibility criteria for secondary pupils. However, it is disappointing that the commitment that all Scottish primary school pupils would be entitled to a free school lunch by August 2022 has still not been delivered. This is an effective way to further reduce the gap between income and costs that families face.*

Introduction

CPAG's annual *Cost of a Child* report looks at how much it costs families to provide a minimum socially acceptable standard of living for their children. Since 2012, this report series has systematically monitored the minimum cost of a child across the UK, and since 2022, a Scotland specific report has been written. This summary provides the latest calculations for 2025 and outlines the factors affecting the latest figures.

To estimate the overall cost of bringing up a child in the UK today, the report draws upon the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) research, carried out by the Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.¹ MIS is based on public consensus about what is needed for a minimum socially acceptable standard of living in urban UK, outside London. This minimum living standard is one that provides for material needs, but also enables participation in society.

The cost of an individual child is calculated not just by considering the cost of all the goods and services that a child needs, but as the difference that the presence of that child makes to the whole family's budget. These calculations are made for different children according to their birth order, in each year of their childhood, and are added up to produce a total cost from birth to age 18.

There are some important things to note about these calculations. Firstly, the costs are what the public deems a minimum acceptable standard of living. This is far higher than destitution, higher than the current relative poverty line, but should still be seen as just a minimum. A family that is able to cover 100 per cent of costs should not be seen as a well-off, rather having just enough for a minimum acceptable standard of living.

Secondly, the costs shown are the same as the UK-wide costs (apart from the remote Scotland geographies table) – this is in order to better compare the income and share of costs covered for different family types in Scotland compared to the rest of the UK. The hypothetical families live in social housing in an average housing costs area, and when working - work full-time with formal wrap-around childcare. The costs may be higher in parts of Scotland such as Edinburgh (and vice-versa), and will be higher still if families are in private rented housing.

Thirdly, for many in-work families the share of costs covered will be even lower as parents face substantial barriers to work (availability of jobs, availability of childcare, transport costs, childcare costs, inflexible hours) meaning they are more likely to work part-time than other groups. There are also other factors (e.g. disabilities) that will impact on the ability of the family to work and the income they receive. There is not enough space in this report to precisely measure every possible family situation, although the broad trends will apply to all family types.

¹ J Stone and M Padley, *A Minimum Income Standard for the United Kingdom in 2025*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025

The cost of a child in 2025

The scorecard below shows the total cost of raising a child to age 18, and how that compares to the income received by families with two children and different work circumstances. It shows that the cost of child is over £250,000 for a couple and nearly £290,000 for a lone parent.

Scorecard: The Cost of a Child in Scotland in 2025

A. The additional cost of bringing up a child in 2025	<i>(Minimum cost, averaged for first and second child)</i>	
	Couple	Lone parent
1. Basic cost over 18 years	£167,679	£189,053
2. Full cost over 18 years	£251,018	£287,219
B. The extent to which families have enough to cover the minimum cost of living	<i>Net income as a percentage of minimum family costs – Scotland% (Rest of UK%)</i>	
	Couple	Lone parent
3. Out of work	46% (37%)	55% (44%)
4. Working full time on the minimum wage	90% (82%)	79% (69%)
5. Working full time on the median wage	99% (98%)	81% (79%)

Note: 'Basic cost' does not include rent, childcare or council tax. 'Net income' refers to disposable income, after subtracting rent, childcare and council tax. These calculations assume eligibility for universal credit, with entitlements updated to April 2025.

The scorecard also shows that out-of-work households can cover less than half their costs (46 per cent for a couple family, 55 per cent for a lone-parent family). In-work families can cover more of their costs, but even they struggle to meet the cost of the minimum acceptable standard of living. A couple working full time on the minimum wage can cover 90 per cent of their costs, while a lone parent working full time on the minimum wage can only cover 79 per cent. A lone parent working full time on the median wage can only cover 81 per cent of their family costs, while a couple both working full time on the median wage can cover 99 percent of their family costs.

As a single mother... I am always feeling anxious... I work part time and I struggle with budgeting for the family. I am on benefit[s] and inflation is on the rise. I have to pay bills. I resulted in collecting vouchers and using food banks to make ends meet. Most of the time I have to set priorities for things needed around the house. My preferences were always on survival over anything else. (Ivy-Rose L, April 2025)

By comparing the main figure to the figure in brackets, we can see the impact of Scotland specific policies on the share of costs covered. For all family types the share of costs covered in Scotland is greater than the share covered elsewhere in the UK.² This is particularly apparent for out of work families and those working full time on the minimum wage – this is largely because they gain from more generous means-tested benefits such as the Scottish child payment.

² For more details see the Scotland-specific support section or the appendix.

I would love my daughter who is almost 3 to have the opportunity to start a [gymnastics] class every week but even although I work 21 hours a week & she is in nursery I just can't afford it. I am riddled in debt, stopping one payment to pay another and it's a vicious circle. I would love to start university again to become a nurse but as a single parent with not much help it is virtually impossible. (Victor U, February 2025)

There are some basic things to note from the scorecard. Firstly, the cost of a child is higher for a lone parent than a couple. This is primarily due to economies of scale within household budgets, which benefit couples more than singles. For example, the public agree that for people without children, it is fine to rely on public transport as a minimum, but households with children should be able to have a car. For couple parents, the cost of a car is offset by saving the public transport costs for two adults; for a lone parent, they only save the public transport costs for one adult. Secondly, the share of adult costs covered by the standard allowance in UC is very low. Thirdly, as earnings increase, increase in costs covered is greater for a couple as they have two pay checks coming in, while a lone parent only has one.

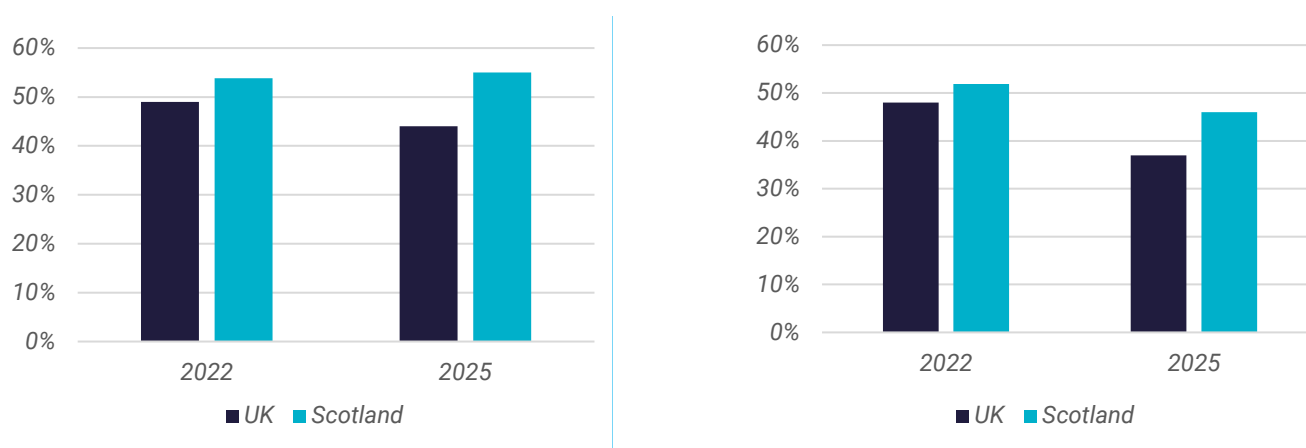
Trends over time

The UK-wide COAC calculations started in 2008. For most of that time period, the share of costs covered would have very been similar in Scotland at the rest of the UK, as devolution was limited and therefore there was limited relevant policy difference between Scotland and the rest of the UK. For greater discussion of what happened from 2008 to 2022 see the UK wide COAC report.³

The rising prices mean essentials like energy, housing, and food are difficult to afford, even when you are working. For instance, direct financial support such as free school meals, rent and the Scottish Child Payment help are vital, and go a long way. (Lou, August 2025)

The Scottish COAC calculations started in 2022. Figure 1 shows how the share of costs covered for an out-of-work lone parent and couple with two children has evolved from 2022 to 2025. We can see that the UK-wide trend is for a lower share of costs being covered. This is because costs have risen dramatically – not only due to high headline inflation, but also because there has been particular pressure on low-income families, as areas where they spend a greater share of their income (food, energy), saw sharp price rises higher than overall inflation.

Figure 1: Change in share of costs covered for out-of-work lone parents (Panel A) and couples (Panel B) since 2022



In Scotland, this trend has to a significant extent been mitigated. In Scotland the share of costs covered for couples only fell from 52 per cent to 46 per cent, half of the fall seen across the rest of the UK. While,

³ The Cost of a Child in 2025, CPAG, 2025

lone parents actually saw an increase in the share of their costs covered from 54 per cent to 55 per cent. The key reason for this is an increase in the value of the Scottish child payment.

In April 2022 the Scottish child payment was £20 per week and only eligible to children aged 6 or under in families on universal credit (or equivalent), but by April 2025, all children aged under 16 on universal credit (or equivalent), were eligible for a payment of £27.15 per week. This shows the real importance that increasing the adequacy of the social security system can have on family incomes. Nonetheless, it is also worth highlighting that out-of-work families in Scotland are still only able to cover half of the costs associated with a minimum standard of living, more must be done to help these families.

Scotland-specific support

This section examines how key differences in costs and financial support for families affect the cost of raising a child in Scotland, as compared to the UK as a whole. The overall cost of a child in the UK is used as a starting point, and is adjusted based on these differences.

Table 1: Breakdown of Scotland-specific support by family type

	Family with little or no work: qualifies for means-tested benefits, but no childcare costs	Family working full time, paying for childcare and receiving UC	Family working full time, paying for childcare and not eligible for UC
Free school meals P4-P5*	£795	£795	£795
Free bus travel	£3,017	£3,017	£3,017
Scottish child payment	£22,651	£22,651	
Best start grants**	£965	£965	
School clothing grant	£1,770		
Lower cost childcare		£53	£356
Total benefit to family	£29,198	£27,481	£4,168

*Assumed gain includes those previously entitled to means-tested support, by making it easier to take up when stigma removed

**Average for first two children, net of UK's Sure Start Maternity Grants

***Assumes no childcare where little or no work; 85% of childcare covered where working full time and receiving UC

Table 1 shows the breakdown of Scotland-specific support by family type. We can see that for a family eligible for the Scottish child payment (ie, eligible for universal credit; a couple both working full time on the median wage would have earnings too high to qualify for universal credit), they receive nearly £30,000 per child over their childhood. The most important component is the Scottish child payment, which works out at £22,651 for each child.

I think with a lot of things have seems to be a bit of a postcode lottery, I live in Scotland. So I've been able to take advantage of the Scottish child payment, but I know that's not available in other parts of the UK. (Lainey J, May 2025)

These different forms of support clearly make a big difference to low-income families in Scotland but as the earlier figures show, many families in Scotland are still struggling to meet the costs associated with a minimum standard of living.

Cost variations in remote areas of Scotland

Aside from childcare and housing, household costs are broadly comparable across urban areas of the UK. However, in remote rural areas of Scotland the minimum cost of an acceptable standard of living can be substantially higher than in urban areas. Research adapting MIS to take into account the higher costs associated with living in remote rural Scotland has shown that these costs relate both to differences in needs – such as longer travel times to work and to access facilities, and to higher costs for certain goods and services.

Table 2: Breakdown of Scotland-specific support by family type

	Urban UK	Remote Scotland, mainland	Scottish Islands
Food	£205.22	£207.86	£216.55
Clothing	£49.10	£53.31	£53.54
Household goods	£38.74	£40.52	£45.27
Personal good and services	£114.66	£108.95	£111.95
Transport	£126.82	£185.58	£159.94
Social and cultural participation	£174.02	£178.92	£198.07
Total budget	£708.56	£775.14	£785.30

Table 2 shows the minimum weekly budgets for different geographies for a couple with two children. We can see that costs are higher for families living in more remote areas of Scotland. The main areas of higher costs are transport, and social and cultural participation.

Conclusion

Across the UK, families are further than ever before from covering the costs needed for a minimum standard of living. The key driver of this is a lack of investment in social security at the UK level. In Scotland the gap continues to be significantly narrower than the UK as a whole as a result of Scottish policy interventions, in particular the Scottish child payment. However, even in Scotland, many low-income families still do not have enough income to cover all the costs of a minimum living standard.

It is therefore vital to invest in child related benefits to enable families to cover more of their costs. The analysis is clear that work by itself is not the answer – the in-work households used in the calculations are working full-time and are still unable to cover the costs associated with a minimum standard of living. Earnings can only go so far for households with children, as pay cheques are the same as for those without children, but the costs their households face are much higher.

I try not to go literally mad when budgeting because the basic needs exclusive of luxuries cannot be afforded. Also, as a Widowed Single Mom of children, I sacrifice a lot just to make sure the children are fine. (Cindy A, April 2025)

The Scottish government should increase the value of the Scottish child payment as the most direct and effective method of getting money into the pockets of low-income families and accelerating progress on child poverty.

The Scottish government must also extend universal free school meals to all Primary 6 and Primary 7 pupils. The recent extension of free school meal entitlement to children in Primary 6 and Primary 7 who are in families in receipt of Scottish child payment is welcome, as is the piloting of extended eligibility criteria for secondary pupils. However it is disappointing that the commitment that all Scottish primary school pupils would be entitled to a free school lunch by August 2022 has still not been delivered, this is an effective way to further reduce the gap between income and costs that families face.

The UK government should abolish the benefit cap and invest in children via child benefit and the child element of universal credit. It is not just families affected by the two-child limit and benefit cap who are struggling. This would mean a wide range of families are able to cover more of their costs.

About the calculations

All calculations in this report were carried out by Dr Juliet Stone at the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP), an independent research centre based in the School of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. Over the past 40 years, it has built a national and international reputation for high quality applied policy research. The Centre's biggest role at present is the researching and analysis of A Minimum Income Standard for the United Kingdom. Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, this is the leading standard of its kind in the UK, where it is being used to set the living wage, and is being replicated in other countries seeking to establish benchmarks for acceptable household income levels rooted in social consensus. lboro.ac.uk/research/crsp

About CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights. Child Poverty Action Group is a registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339). cpag.org.uk

Appendix: Details on Scotland-specific support

This section details what the Scottish government provides, over and above what is available for parents across the UK. This support combines measures that are provided universally, and additional means-tested support for working and non-working families on lower incomes.

The first of the universal measures, introduced in January 2022, is the provision of free school meals for all children in primary school up to P5 (Year 4 in England and Wales), when children are aged 8 or 9 years old. Children in Scotland had previously been offered free school lunches only up to P3 (the first three years of primary school), as is still the case in England.

During the MIS research, parents agreed that, as a minimum, it was acceptable for children to have a packed lunch at school. In calculating the saving provided by having access to universal free school lunches, we therefore assume that this will offset the cost of packed lunches for the duration of P4 and P5. Over two years, we estimate that this will save families in Scotland £795 per child. The consensus in groups was that children would be less likely to want to have school meals if they are not universal, and that parents could potentially have to provide packed lunches anyway. Therefore, parents felt it was important to factor in the cost of a packed lunch for these children. The expansion of eligibility for means tested free school meals in Scotland has therefore made no difference to the cost of a child calculations.

The second universal measure unique to Scotland compared to the rest of the UK is the introduction, in January 2022, of free bus travel to everyone aged up to 21. Although the MIS basket of goods and services for households with children includes a second-hand car, people agreed that there was a need for older children to be able to travel independently, including in some cases to get to school. This works out as a saving of more than £3,000 in the lifetime cost of a child for families in Scotland, compared to the UK as a whole.

There are also a number of means-tested benefits available to families on lower incomes in Scotland. The most substantial of these is the Scottish child payment, available to all families receiving universal credit (UC) and certain legacy benefits. The payment was first introduced in 2021 for children under the age of 6 at a rate of £10 per week, rising to £20 a week in April 2022. In November 2022, the payment was extended to include all children under 16 years old and was increased to £25 per child. In April 2025 it was uprated to £27.15 per week. For eligible families, this amounts to more than £22,000 per child from birth to age 16.

Alongside the Scottish child payment, families receiving relevant benefits can apply to receive three 'best start grant' payments between the child's birth and starting school. The first payment is worth £768 for the first child, and £384 for subsequent children. There are then two additional payments of £320 each at ages 3 and 5 for every child. In contrast, parents in the rest of the UK receive only one payment of £500, and only for their first child, via the Sure Start maternity grant. Therefore, a family with two children receive a total of £2,432 in Scotland (an average of £1,216 per child), but only £500 in the rest of the UK. This amounts to additional support of around £1,930, or £965 per child, in Scotland.

The final additional benefit for low-income families in Scotland that we consider here is the school clothing grant. The grant provides at least £120 a year to primary and £150 to secondary school pupils to help with the cost of school uniforms. Eligibility for this is more restricted than for the other means-tested support: it is only available to parents who are out of work, or who are working but on a very low income. However, for those who receive the grant, it provides families with an additional £1,770.

For parents in paid work, childcare accounts for a substantial proportion of the costs associated with having a young child. This has become even more pronounced during the past few years as the cost of childcare has risen rapidly. As noted previously, the absolute cost of childcare varies substantially geographically, but the rate of change in prices also differs.