

Change is Possible: Tackling child poverty in the new Scottish Parliament

Briefing for MSPs from members of the End Child Poverty coalition



“Kids shouldn’t have to think ‘my life is smaller’ or ‘my chances are smaller’... their childhood constrained by worries about surviving.”

– Seren, Parent, Changing Realities Project

Change is possible

We all want to make sure children in Scotland grow up with the things they need to learn, play, grow, and thrive. Poverty too often prevents children getting the childhoods they deserve.

We can solve child poverty because we know the solutions. By taking bold and ambitious action, we can unlock the potential of every child in Scotland, allowing them to grow up to be part of a fairer, more prosperous Scotland. And we can also rebuild the broken trust with families struggling to get by who feel overlooked and ignored by politicians.

In 2017, the Scottish Parliament unanimously set legally binding targets including to reduce child poverty in Scotland to less than 10% by 2030. **In this new parliamentary session (2026-2031), the actions taken will determine whether we meet these targets**, and it is vital that progress is made each and every year of the session.

Progress towards these targets has already been made, but meeting them will take significant further action and investment. Child poverty remains unacceptably high in Scotland. One in five children in Scotland are currently growing up in poverty. Based on where we are now, meeting the targets will mean lifting an additional 100,000 children out of poverty. This is possible, and while all the evidence suggests we need to act fast and be bold, what a legacy it would be for this Parliament to give these children their childhoods back.

In this Parliament, MSPs across the chamber have an opportunity to drive forward progress on tackling child poverty. We urge you to seize this opportunity and champion the solutions that members of the End Child Poverty coalition all agree are needed.

What causes child poverty?

Child poverty is caused by a lack of income to meet essential living costs and the increased costs that come with having children.ⁱⁱ There are three driving causes of child poverty: inadequate income from employment, inadequate income from social security, and the high cost of living.

These causes, or drivers, are largely outside parents' control and always outside of children's control. They are the product of political and economic choices. Child poverty is deeply connected to women's poverty as the living standards of children often depend on the income of their mother.ⁱⁱⁱ To meet the scale of the problem, this Parliament must take bold action to support families across ALL these three drivers. Work alone is not always enough to prevent poverty for families. The majority of children growing up in poverty (75%) live in working households.^{iv}

“Financial insecurity makes me feel anxious all the time. I'm always calculating in my head if we'll make it to payday. It gives me headaches, poor sleep, and sometimes I feel really down and ashamed... if I felt calmer, I could [enjoy] time with my kids more without the stress and worry of finances.” - Marty, Parent, Changing Realities

Families need support to increase their earnings from work and afford the costs of raising a child (including food, fuel and housing). Families, whether in or out of work, need a reliable social security foundation to support them with the additional costs of raising children and when capacity to work is constrained, for example by ill health, disability or caring responsibilities.

Some children are at greater risk of poverty. There are six household types that have been identified as more likely to experience poverty. The vast majority of children in poverty in Scotland (nearly 9 in 10) are in at least one of these 'priority groups.'^v These are; lone parents, minority ethnic families, families with a disabled member, families with a mother aged under 25, families with babies, and larger families. For these groups the rate of poverty is much higher than for all children.^{vi}

Progress made so far

Since the introduction of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act in 2017 we have seen welcome progress. The latest official statistics show the proportion of children in poverty in Scotland fell from 25% between 2020-2023 to 21% in 2022-2025, a substantive four percentage point reduction. In the UK as a whole, 28% of children were living in poverty across the same period.^{vii}

The introduction of the Scottish Child Payment is a key reason for this progress. The Scottish Child Payment alone is estimated to keep 50,000 children out of relative poverty in 2026-27, reducing child poverty by five percentage points.^{viii} Parents and carers tell us that the Scottish Child Payment has allowed them to spend more on the basics such as food, energy and nappies as well as on social and educational opportunities for their children. Investing in social security is key to preventing, not just reducing, child poverty. All of the analysis is clear that there is no route to meeting the targets without further investment in the Scottish child payment.^{ix}

“[The Scottish child payment] has enabled me and my son to participate in more social and educational activities which normally we would have struggled to afford. It alleviates some of the financial pressure and gives me and my son more breathing space to enjoy life.” – Lisa, Parent, Changing Realities

Alongside investment in social security, there has also been welcome action to address other drivers of poverty, including improvements in employment support, investment in affordable housing and the expansion of funded early learning and childcare and free school meals.

This progress matters. By enabling greater financial stability in children's lives, we boost their development and life-long educational attainment, social and emotional outcomes and mental and physical health.^x In turn, this will keep costs to services in Scotland lower in the long term and increases tax revenue through higher earnings.^{xi} By investing in children, we are investing in a better future for all of us.

Despite this progress, too many families are still being left behind. We need to go further. Unless policy efforts and investment are ramped up, we are set to miss the 2030 targets by some way.^{xii}

What does the 2026-2031 Scottish Parliament need to deliver?

To build on the progress that has been made towards the targets, End Child Poverty coalition members in Scotland are calling for:

1. **An immediate increase to the Scottish Child Payment** to at least £40 per week, rising to £55 by the end of this Parliament.
2. **A social security system that provides all families with the foundation to thrive**, for example through increasing income maximisation advice.
3. **Improved employment opportunities for parents.** This must include action to support parents - especially mothers - to enter, sustain and progress in work alongside action to drive improvements in the quality of work and to ensure it is family friendly and flexible around childcare.
4. **Improved early learning and childcare** to increase flexibility, accessibility and affordability, with a focus on families with very young children, families with disabled children, and parents – especially mothers - working shifts or irregular hours.^{xiii}
5. **Investment in affordable social housing** to ensure all children live in safe, secure and affordable homes.^{xiv}
6. **Free School Meals** for all primary school pupils and, at the very least, to all secondary school pupils receiving Scottish Child Payment.
7. **Support for families in debt** especially through reforming public debt recovery processes to prevent debt trapping families in poverty.^{xv}

This action must be underpinned by:

1. **Sustainably funded whole-family support for all who need it** combining income maximisation advice with emotional and practical support from pregnancy onwards to prevent families reaching crisis.
2. **Progressive reform of devolved taxes** to help raise the resources needed to end child poverty.^{xvi}
3. **An equalities approach** that is intersectional, addresses women's poverty and ensures action supports families most at risk of poverty.

About the End Child Poverty coalition

[End Child Poverty](#) is a coalition of over 150 organisations, with over 30 members in Scotland. The coalition includes children's charities, child welfare organisations, social justice groups, trade unions and others. Members include Child Poverty Action Group, Save the Children, the Poverty Alliance, Children First, One Parent Families Scotland, Shelter Scotland, CRER, Close the Gap and Includem. Members have longstanding expertise and policy calls informed by the voices of children and families. We look forward to working with you to drive down poverty over the next five years.

For more information or to discuss the contents of this briefing in more detail please contact Maria Marshall, Policy Officer, CPAG: mmarshall@cpagscotland.org.uk or Suzi Murning, Influencing Manager, Save the Children: S.Murning@savethechildren.org.uk.

ⁱ [The Changing Realities Project](#) is a partnership between parents and carers on a low income, researchers at the University of Glasgow and Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland.

ⁱⁱ The standard way to measure child poverty uses relative household income. A child is said to be living in poverty if they live in a household with income below 60 per cent of the national average (median) income.

ⁱⁱⁱ 92% of single parents in Scotland are women, and children from single-parent families have a higher poverty rate than for all children. Women are often primary carers of children and focus their spending choices on children's needs. To make progress on child poverty, this Parliament must address women's poverty. For more information see: One Parent Families Scotland, [Single Parents' Manifesto](#), 2026 and Close the Gap, Engender and Scottish Women's Aid, [Call for evidence on the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan](#), 2025.

^{iv} In 2021-24, it is estimated that 75% of children in relative poverty after housing costs were living in working households. Scottish Government, [Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2021-24](#), 2026.

^v JRF, [Poverty in Scotland](#), 2025.

^{vi} The proportion of children in relative poverty after housing costs in Scotland 2021-24 was 23% for all children. For the priority groups this was; 3 or more children in the household (41%), Disabled household member(s) (27%), youngest child in the household is under 1 (35%), minority ethnic household (37%), and single parent in the household (36%). Scottish Government, [Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2021-24](#), 2025.

^{vii} Some caution is still required in interpreting these figures - the 2020-23 data only includes two years of data due to disruption to surveys during the coronavirus pandemic, and further years of data will be needed to confirm the trend.

^{viii} Scottish Government, [Bringing Hope, Building Futures: Tackling child poverty delivery plan 2026-2031 – annex 5: Cumulative Impact Assessment](#), 2026.

^{ix} In June 2025, the Scottish Government's cumulative impact assessment estimated relative child poverty to be 22% in 2029-30 with a possible additional 2-percentage point reduction from the mitigation of the two-child limit (Scottish Government, [Child poverty modelling: update](#), 2025.) Modelling from the Fraser of Allander institute suggests that, with the current set of tax and benefit policies in Scotland (including mitigation of the two-child limit), the 2030/31 relative child poverty rate be around 20%. (Fraser of Allander, [Meeting Scotland's child poverty targets](#), 2025.) IPPR's estimate of the child poverty rate in 2030 under 'business as usual', including the mitigation of the two child limit, would be 22% (IPPR, [Achieving the 2030 child poverty target](#), 2025).

^x Investing in social security for families today has positive outcomes on children's health and development so that they can flourish in the future. Kerris Cooper & Kitty Stewart, 2021. "Does Household Income Affect children's Outcomes? A Systematic Review of the Evidence," The International Society of Child Indicators (ISCI), vol. 14(3), 2021.

^{xi} An estimated £2.3 billion of health boards' budgets are currently directed at responding to the impacts of poverty. See: IPPR, [Tipping the Scales: The Social and Economic Harm of Poverty in Scotland](#), 2023.

^{xii} Scottish Government, [Bringing Hope, Building Futures: Cumulative Impact Assessment](#), 2026.

^{xiii} For more detail on proposals and principles for an expanded childcare system in Scotland, see: One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) and Close the Gap, [A childcare system for all](#), 2023. CPAG, Close the Gap, One Parent Families Scotland, Parenting Across Scotland, [A vision for childcare that helps end poverty in Scotland](#), 2022. Pregnant then Screwed and New Economics Foundation, [Scotland's Childcare Guarantee](#), 2025.

^{xiv} Including investment in the 15,693 social homes needed very year to reduce homelessness and ensure all children live in safe, secure and affordable homes. Shelter Scotland, [Affordable Housing Need in Scotland Post-2026](#), 2025.

^{xv} Families with a disabled member and single parent families are at a greater risk of having public debt arrears. There is also a gendered nature to public debt; Coerced debt, a form of domestic abuse, works to entrench women's and children's poverty. See: Aberlour, [Scottish Women's Aid and Financially Included, Coerced Debt Joint Briefing](#), 2024.

^{xvi} See: Tax Justice Scotland, [Scotland Demands Better on Tax](#), 2025.