



Programme for Scottish Government 2026–2031

June 2026

Introduction

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When we talk about child poverty, we're not talking about numbers on a page. We're talking about the child who pretends they're not hungry because there's no food left at home. We're talking about the young person who avoids school trips because their family can't afford it and they're too embarrassed to say why. We're talking about parents who go without meals so their children can eat, and about the silent worry that sits in so many homes every single day.

(young person, Cost of the School Day Voice Network)

- **1 in 5 children in Scotland are still living in poverty.**¹
- **Child poverty is not inevitable.** The right policies, a strong legal framework, clear commitment and adequate investment can make a huge difference.
- **Child poverty in Scotland is falling. Scottish policy and spending choices are making a difference.** Child poverty is significantly lower than across the UK as a whole.²
- However, Scotland is not yet on track to meet its **legally binding 2030 child poverty targets**, as required by the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act passed with all-party support in 2017.
- **Scottish child payment is particularly effective** and is making a positive difference to the lives of children. However, there are gaps that mean some struggling families still miss out. These need to be addressed, and the value of the payment needs to be increased to help ensure child poverty targets are met.
- **All of Scotland's policy levers, tax and spending powers** must be used to the fullest to ensure families have the resources they need to give their children a decent start in life. **Employment, education, housing and childcare policies must be developed with the goal of preventing and ending child poverty at their heart.**
- Budget pressures and long-term fiscal sustainability pose a real challenge to the Scottish government. In this context it is vital that public sector reform, tax and spending decisions contribute to reducing child poverty, and to **reducing the long-term costs that poverty imposes on our public services and economy.**
- **Our Programme for Government** outlines the key policies and investments that must be made. None of these solutions on their own are a silver bullet. But together they would make a huge difference to tens of thousands of children currently denied the opportunities that growing up in Scotland should provide everyone.

¹ Scottish Government, **Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2022-2025**, March 2026.

² The number of children in poverty in Scotland fell from 25% between 2020-2023 to 21% in 2022 to 2025. Across the UK as a whole 27% of children were still living in poverty in 2024/25. See: Department of Work and Pensions **Households Below Average Income (HBAI) statistics**, March 2026 and Scottish Government, **Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2022-2025**, March 2026.

Summary

CPAG in Scotland calls upon the 2026–31 Scottish Parliament to:

- ✓ Ensure year-on-year progress towards meeting Scotland’s legally binding 2030 child poverty targets;
- ✓ Immediately increase Scottish child payment to £40 a week for all eligible children and double its value to at least £55 per week by 2030;
- ✓ Ensure ending child poverty is at the heart of policy across government: employment; childcare and housing strategies are particularly crucial to ending child poverty;
- ✓ Ensure the delivery of Scotland’s social security system provides all families with the foundation to thrive; and
- ✓ Invest in equity in education to ensure school is genuinely free, and that children don’t miss out as a result of their family’s circumstances.

1 in 5

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Prioritise Scotland's children

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The Challenge

Since the introduction of the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 there has been positive action and investment to tackle child poverty in Scotland. The latest official statistics show child poverty to be falling in Scotland, while remaining at a record high across the UK as a whole.³

Despite progress, the drivers of child poverty - inadequacy of income through employment and social security combined with the costs that families face - mean that 21% of children in Scotland remained locked in poverty between 2022 and 2025. While it is clear that existing actions have proven to be effective, progress is not happening fast enough.

The effects of child poverty are real and significant. Despite parents' best efforts, when children grow up in poverty they miss out on things that they should be able to take for granted; school trips, having friends over for tea, hobbies and outings, decent warm clothes, healthy meals. Poverty can lead to long-term negative education and health outcomes with significant costs not just to children themselves but to government and society.⁴

Global events are yet again leading to increases in the cost of living. It is vital the Scottish government ensures emerging cost of living pressures do not undermine progress on tackling child poverty. Rising energy and food prices fall hardest on low-income families with children, who spend a greater share of their income on essentials.⁵

The Solution

The Scottish parliament will need to:

- put reducing child poverty at the heart of the Scottish budget process; a goal of every budget should be to resource policies that will deliver year-on-year progress toward meeting the targets in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act.
- ensure the Scottish government produces a revised Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan as a matter of urgency, building on the framework of Bringing Hope, Building Futures.
- take an equalities approach that addresses women's poverty and ensures action supports families most at risk of poverty.
- use Scotland's tax powers to ensure the nation's income and wealth is harnessed to fund the

social security and public service infrastructure needed to prevent and reduce child poverty.⁶

- prevent public services debt to avoid families getting trapped in poverty; for example, by providing free school meals to all primary and secondary school children and widening eligibility to council tax reduction.
- ensure cost of living support prioritises low-income families with children by using the Scottish social security system to make additional cost of living payments.
- work with the UK government and local government in Scotland, to ensure that eradicating child poverty is at the top of the agenda.

Put reducing
child poverty
at the heart of
the Scottish
budget
process



³ Scottish Government, **Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2022-2025**, March 2026.

⁴ IPPR **Tipping the Scales, the social and economic harm of poverty in Scotland**, May 2023

⁵ Changing Realities, **Why the Cost of Living Crisis is Far from Over for Families on a Low Income**, October 2023

⁶ CPAG in Scotland supports the Tax Justice Scotland coalition. For more information see: Tax Justice Scotland, **Choosing a fairer future for all**, 2024

Invest in social security for children and families

The Challenge

Scottish child payment, currently worth £28.20 a week for each child in a family in receipt of universal credit, has been instrumental in reducing child poverty. It has lifted 40,000 to 50,000 children out of poverty⁷ and reduced the depth of poverty for many more. Families describe how Scottish child payment is helping to pay for essential household bills and costs, making a 'huge difference,' easing pressure on payments and providing 'freedom' for children.⁸ Recent analysis has found it has had a significant impact on child wellbeing, food insecurity and deprivation.⁹ It also removes barriers to employment by helping parents pay for childcare and transport.¹⁰ All the evidence is clear that there is no credible route to meeting Scotland's child poverty targets that does not build on this success by increasing the value of social security support, and that increases to Scottish child payment 'are the most effective tool available.'¹¹

The commitment to increase the value of the payment to £40 per week for under ones from 2027 is welcome, but under ones make up only three per cent of children receiving Scottish child payment.¹²

Furthermore, some children miss out on Scottish child payment:

Scottish child payment stops when a child turns 16. This causes financial difficulties at a time when families' costs stay the same or increase. Extending Scottish child payment to 16- to 19-year-olds who are in full-time, non-advanced education or approved training would reduce the financial pressures and associated worry parents face, enhance the choices available to young people as they navigate transitions to adulthood and reduce overall levels of child poverty.

Furthermore, some low-income families are unable to access Scottish child payment. This includes those in temporary accommodation (because housing benefit is not a qualifying benefit), and some low-income workers (because maternity allowance is not a qualifying benefit).

Other families are excluded from getting universal credit and therefore Scottish child payment because of their immigration status.

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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, Changing Realities, 2025

⁷ Modelling from the Scottish government estimates Scottish child payment to keep 50,000 children out of relative poverty in 2026-27. Scottish Government, **Tackling child poverty delivery plan 2026-2031 – annex 5: Cumulative Impact Assessment 2026**

CPAG's own analysis suggests the payment lifts around 50,000 children out of poverty, while reducing the depth of poverty for many more. CPAG, **State of the Nations**, 2024

IPPR Scotland modelling in April 2023 estimated 40,000 children to be lifted out of poverty by the £25 payment. IPPR Scotland, **Poverty doesn't have to be inevitable** – it needs political will and investment to eradicate, 2023

⁸ Family Finances and Changing Realities, **Investing in all our futures: improving the good the Scottish Child Payment can do**, 2026

⁹ Family Finances, **Investing in Children: Early findings the difference Scottish child payment makes to child well-being**. December 2025

¹⁰ Scottish Government, **Five family payments: evaluation**, September 2025

¹¹ Fraser of Allander Institute, **Meeting Scotland's child poverty targets, modelling and policy packages**. Fraser of Allander Institute, March 2025. IPPR **Achieving the 2030 Child Poverty Target**, March 2025.

JRF, **Meeting the Moment: Scottish Election 2026**. June 2025, Child Poverty Action Group, **State of the Nations: lessons in tackling child poverty from across the four nations**, October 2024.

¹² Social Security Scotland, Table 11, **Scottish child payment statistics to December 2025**, February 2026.

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We know that change is complicated and that there are difficult decisions to make. But from where we stand, the reality is simple: no child should have to miss out on vital opportunities. No child should feel “less than” because of something they can’t control. We’re asking you, from the heart, to use your power, your voice, and your influence to keep child poverty at the very top of the agenda, not as a side issue, but as a national priority.

(young person, Cost of the School Day Voice Network)

The Solution

- **Extend the planned increase to the Scottish child payment** to £40 a week for babies to **all eligible children** as a step toward doubling its value to at least £55 per week by 2030. Increasing the payment to £55 would reduce the number of children in poverty by 30,000, another three-percentage point reduction, at a cost of £455m.¹³
- A permanent increase to Scottish child payment is the best option to improve the financial resilience of families, but additional cost of living payments for children eligible for Scottish child payment should also be used as an emergency response to cost of living crises.
- **Extend Scottish child payment to all 16- to 19-year-olds** who are in full-time, non-advanced education or approved training. We estimate that 43,000 young people would benefit from this extension, at a cost of £43 million.
- **Make housing benefit a qualifying benefit for Scottish child payment** so that families in temporary accommodation don’t miss out.
- **Make maternity allowance a qualifying benefit** for Scottish child payment so that low-income workers don’t miss out.
- Provide funding and guidance to local authorities to deliver payments at least **equivalent to the Scottish child payment to children where families are excluded from social security support due to immigration status**, using section 22 (3) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

Increasing the payment to £55 would reduce the number of children in poverty by 30,000



¹³ CPAG modelling. The calculations come from UKMOD version B1.11 UKMOD is maintained, developed and managed by the Centre for Microsimulation and Policy Analysis (CeMPA) at the University of Essex. The results and their interpretation are the author’s sole responsibility. The cost has been given in 2030/31 prices.

Ensure ending child poverty is at the heart of policy across government

The Challenge

The new Scottish government must use all the powers at its disposal if it is to meet its targets on child poverty. Putting the goal of ending child poverty at the heart of housing, employment and childcare policy will be particularly vital to ending child poverty, whilst health, education and transport policies will all need a clear child poverty focus.

Childcare

It is vital that childcare provision delivers high-quality services that improve child development and outcomes, as well as enabling parents to work the hours they need and want. Scotland led the way in introducing 1,140 hours of free childcare for all children age three to five regardless of working status. However, there is still a lack of affordable childcare,¹⁴ especially for under threes (free hours for two-year-olds are restricted to eligible households) and for after-school clubs (which have a higher average cost per week than England and Wales.)¹⁵

Real gaps exist, particularly for older children, disabled children and where parents work atypical hours. Low-paid childcare workers are often also

Housing, employment and childcare policy will be particularly vital to ending child poverty



parents living in poverty. Adequate investment is needed to ensure childcare contributes to reducing child poverty by enhancing children's experiences, removing barriers to work and improving wages and conditions of those who deliver the service.

The initial cost of childcare is a barrier to taking up work, particularly for parents who rely on support to pay childcare costs through universal credit. Some families struggle to retain childcare spaces when they experience gaps in universal credit entitlement causing them to lose help with childcare costs. This is often due to the way that universal credit is calculated.

Housing

Housing costs have an important impact on levels of child poverty. In the period 2022-25, before housing costs are taken into consideration, 180,000 children were living in poverty, after housing costs were taken into account that figure rises to 210,000.¹⁶ This reflects the inadequacy of the actual incomes' families have at their disposal once housing costs are taken into account, something families have little control over. Child poverty in Scotland is lower compared to the UK in part due to lower cost housing and a larger social housing sector.¹⁷ Children residing in social housing can be shielded from poverty as their families avoid high private rentals.¹⁸ However, good quality affordable family housing is still too often difficult to access.¹⁹

Reduced support for housing costs within the UK social security system leaves many families with a shortfall which they must cover from other means, including benefits not meant for housing costs. This can leave families with little or nothing to live on, pushing them into deeper poverty.

¹⁴ Scottish Women's Budget Group, **Childcare Survey 2023**

¹⁵ Coram, **Childcare Survey 2025**.

¹⁶ Scottish government, **Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2022-2025**, March 2026.

¹⁷ IPPR, **What would it take to eradicate child poverty in Scotland?** March 2026

¹⁸ IPPR **Social housing need of the hour amid homelessness crisis**, 2024.

¹⁹ CaCHE, **What do lower income tenants in Scotland's private rented sector want to see from a new rented sector?** 2022.

Employment

The level of paid work in a family is a key factor in providing protection from poverty. In a family where all the adults in the house work full time, the risk of child poverty is only 7%, compared to 33% where one adult is in full time work but the other is not.²⁰ Yet 75% of children in poverty live in households where one, or both, parents are working.²¹ Child poverty, gender and disability are inextricably linked.²² Removing barriers to work for mothers and for parents affected by disability, and tackling the labour market inequality they face, is necessary to prevent child poverty.²³

Working families have difficulty anticipating their budget when fluctuating earnings and fluctuating universal credit entitlement cause temporary gaps in Scottish child payment entitlement. Fluctuating entitlement can leave some families worse off if their earnings increase. Many families in these circumstances will not be aware that they will lose entitlement, or do not have autonomy over their working pattern to manage this. A short-term change, such as an increase in hours worked in retail in the run up to Christmas can result in losing vital support.²⁴

The Solution

Childcare

- **Build on the existing offer of 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.
- **Extend entitlement to ensure parents have the choice of up to 50 hours per week** for all children between six months and five years old at the earliest opportunity.²⁵
- **Ensure high quality school aged childcare is available to all parents** during term time and school holidays.
- **Subsidise providers to deliver periods of free childcare** to help families overcome the issue of having to pay for childcare before it can be reimbursed by universal credit and to help families to retain a childcare place during periods where they do not meet eligibility for support with costs through universal credit.

Housing

- **Invest in the provision of affordable social housing, to ensure all children live in safe, secure and affordable homes.**
- **Continue to invest in discretionary housing payments** to mitigate the bedroom tax benefit cap, local housing allowance and support families to remain in their homes.

Employment

- Ensure a gendered and child poverty focused approach to all labour market policy making
- **Use public procurement and public body wage setting powers to drive improvements in the quality of work**, including addressing low pay, particularly in female dominated sectors such as social care and childcare
- **Introduce a 12-week run on of Scottish child payment** to support workers who experience temporary disruption in entitlement due to fluctuating earnings or universal credit entitlement, and to give workers confidence to increase their hours without the fear of an immediate negative impact on income.

²⁰ Scottish Government, table 23a, three year average estimates **Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2022-2025**, March 2026.

²¹ Scottish Government, **Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2022-2025**, March 2026.

²² Research shows that jobs held by women are concentrated in the lowest paying occupations, and 58.6 per cent of all jobs paid below the real Living Wage in 2025 held by women. Living Wage Foundation, **Employee jobs paid below the real Living Wage: 2025**, 2026.

Families with a disabled adult or child are one of the priority groups identified as being at a higher risk of poverty. Across the UK disabled employees are paid less per hour than non-disabled employees. TUC, **Disability pay and employment gaps**, 2024.

Disabled women in Scotland report facing barriers to work, training and progression. Close the Gap, **Excluded by Design: Research on disabled women's employment in Scotland**, 2025.

²³ JRF, **Poverty in Scotland 2025**, 2025.

²⁴ CPAG, **Strengthening Scottish Social Security for Children and Families**, 2026.

²⁵ CPAG, (alongside OPFS, Close the Gap and Parenting Across Scotland, **A Vision for Childcare that Helps End Poverty in Scotland**, 2022.

Ensure the delivery of Scotland's social security system provides all families with the foundation to thrive

The Challenge

In 2018, all the political parties at Holyrood unanimously agreed to the Scottish social security principles. These are contained in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 and state that: social security is an investment in the people of Scotland; respect for the dignity of individuals is to be at the heart of the Scottish social security system, and; social security is to contribute to reducing poverty.

The system is working to prevent and reduce child poverty, especially through the Scottish child payment and other low-income family payments. Furthermore children in households with a disabled person make up almost half of all children in poverty²⁶ so Scotland's disability and carers benefits play a crucial role in preventing poverty.

Yet we know that families sometimes miss out on benefits that they are entitled to because they do not know about them or because of confusion about eligibility.²⁷ Low-income families will often have to make claims and provide information to the DWP, Social Security Scotland, HMRC and local authorities. The onus is placed on families to know what to apply for and to whom.

This also causes families to miss out on benefits they are entitled to if the benefit starts from the date they applied rather than when they met the eligibility conditions. Many families only get all the benefits that they are entitled to once they have received support from an expert welfare rights adviser.

The last Parliament passed the Social Security (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2025 as part of its commitment to continuously improving the Scottish social security system. However much of the Act has not yet been commenced. As a result, the intended improvements have not yet been implemented, and the benefits of the legislation have not been realised.

Social Security Scotland is already using artificial intelligence²⁸ and is committed to expanding its use.²⁹ The use of artificial intelligence has the potential to be beneficial, for example speeding up processes or improving analysis, but it also contains risks, notably lack of transparency,³⁰ discrimination³¹ and lack of legal redress.³²

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When I go through income maximisation and I'm like... what about your Scottish child payment?" they're like... "Oh, I get my child payments." "...You get your child benefit but what about your Scottish child payment?" It's like, "Is that not the same thing?"

Adviser - June 2024

²⁶ 47%. Scottish Government, **Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2022-25: Table 27b**, 2026.

²⁷ CPAG, **Children's Benefits in Scotland: clearing up confusion to maximise take up**, February 2025

²⁸ **Social Security Scotland's use of artificial intelligence** (FOI request), January 2026

²⁹ **Scottish Government's AI register**

³⁰ **CPAG's written response** to the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into the use of AI in government.

³¹ Swedish welfare authorities **suspended a discriminatory AI tool** as it was fraudulently and wrongly flagging certain groups in relation to benefit fraud. November 2025

³² Computer Weekly, Tomlinson and Thomas, **Judicial Review of AI in UK Government**: Two emergent forms of legal risk, May 2025

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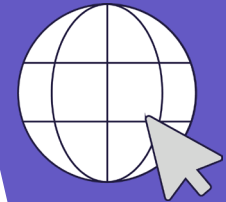
I tried to apply, but the process was quite confusing. A lot of the information seemed to be aimed at people who already have settled status or are on certain benefits. I wasn't sure if I was eligible, and it was hard to get a clear answer. I didn't have all the documents they asked for, and I didn't always understand the system. I ended up not getting the help in the end, which was really discouraging.

Tasha B, Changing Realities, 2025

The Solution

- **Ensure investment in Scottish social security continues in line with the principles set out in the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018.**
Investing in social security is the single most cost-effective way to further reduce child poverty and reduce the costs that child poverty imposes on our public services and our economy.
- **Improve data sharing** between Social Security Scotland, DWP and local authorities to automate entitlement across low-income benefits and support for children.
- **Establish backdating** to allow families to receive Scottish child payment that they would have been entitled to if they had applied at an earlier date.
- **Invest in welfare rights and in maximising take up of benefits. Income maximisation must be an integral element of whole family support.**
Investment must include funding for training and resources to support advisers to keep up to date with the ever-changing social security legislation, guidance and case law.
- **Commence outstanding provisions of the Social Security (Amendment) (Scotland) Act 2025** to: confer regulation making powers in relation to addressing gaps in entitlement for Scottish child payment, and backdating; and improve redetermination and appeals processes.
- **Scrutinise the development and deployment of AI** to ensure transparency and robust safeguards are integral to its use within the Scottish social security system.

Improve data sharing between Social Security Scotland, DWP and local authorities



Invest in equity in education

The Challenge

Evidence from our Cost of the School Day project³³ shows that poverty is still affecting children and young people's readiness to learn,³⁴ their school experiences and their outcomes. While investment in equity has been helping schools reduce financial barriers, school costs continue to affect young people's participation.³⁵

More can be done. Action is still needed from the Scottish government to ensure school education is genuinely free, and that children don't miss out as a result of their family's circumstances.



The Solution

In their School Shouldn't Cost manifesto³⁶, thousands of pupils across Scotland have set out what the government should do to ensure everyone has the same chance to learn:

- **Fund every school to fully remove cost pressures from families** and overcome poverty-related barriers to learning. Make sure every school can fully and consistently remove school costs and invest in learning and wellbeing support staff.
- **Help with the basics that allow pupils to learn and feel included at school.** Fund **free school meals** for all primary and secondary pupils, keep uniform costs low and extend **clothing grants**, provide **1:1 devices and connectivity** across Scotland and ensure equal access to resources and continued support for curriculum costs.
- **Ensure pupils benefit from life changing school trips and activities.** Fund access to 'rite of passage' residentials and secondary school trips, tackle trip transport costs especially for rural and island schools, and guarantee opportunities in and out of school regardless of locality or family income.

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We want every school in Scotland to be fully funded to remove cost pressures from families and to remove every poverty-related barrier to learning. We want a Scotland where no young person is worrying about how they look, what they don't have, or whether they'll miss out just because of money.

Young person from the Cost of the School Day Voice network

³³ **Cost of the School Day**

³⁴ CPAG, **Cost of the School Day Big Question** report and film, 2024.

³⁵ CPAG, **School Shouldn't Cost** – the young people's poverty and education manifesto, 2025.

³⁶ CPAG, **School Shouldn't Cost** – the young people's poverty and education manifesto, 2025.



About CPAG in Scotland

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland works for the over one in five 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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Child Poverty Action Group is a registered charity in England and Wales (294841) and Scotland (SC039339).

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