Briefing for MSPs - Scottish Government debate on child poverty

September 2026

Summary

- **One in five children in Scotland are still living in poverty.** Poverty damages the life chances of children and costs Scotland's economy billions of pounds a year.
- **Child poverty is not inevitable, and progress has already been made.** Action over the last parliament ensured child poverty fell. Child poverty in Scotland is significantly lower than across the UK as a whole.
- **Scottish child payment is a highly effective policy**. It is making a huge difference to families and is the single most powerful tool available to the Scottish government to ensure families have enough money for children to thrive.
- **The Programme for Government was a missed opportunity** to ramp up action and investment and build on the current delivery plan, *Bringing Hope, Building Futures*, published in March.
- Despite **including positive existing commitments -** such as increasing Scottish child payment for under ones and investing in breakfast clubs - **these will not be enough** to significantly further reduce child poverty.
- **Without substantial new investment, Scottish Parliament are at risk of stalling or losing the important progress that has been made.** Current investment does not match the rhetoric of eradicating child poverty.
- Parliament must be bold and act on the evidence we *know* makes a difference. This includes:
    - **Action to ensure child poverty reduces each year.**
    - **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;
    - **Address gaps that cause some low-income families to miss out on the vital payment** – such as creating a 'run-on' to prevent temporarily losing eligibility (for example when parents take on additional shifts at work).[1]
    - **More investment across government, including housing, childcare and employability,** making sure child poverty is at the heart of policy across government.[2]

[1] For more information see: CPAG, Strengthening Scottish social security for children and families, 2026.

[2] For more information see: CPAG, Programme for Scottish Government 2026-2031, 2026.

"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)

Progress has been made

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]

The Scottish child payment has been particularly effective. Currently worth £28.20 a week for each child in a family in receipt of universal credit, Scottish child payment has been instrumental in reducing child poverty. It has lifted 40,000 to 50,000 children out of poverty[4] 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 parents and providing 'freedom' for children.'[5] Recent analysis found it has had a significant impact on child wellbeing, food insecurity and deprivation, estimating 70,000 fewer children are living in material deprivation and food insecurity than would have been without the payment.[6]

Current action does not go far enough

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.

Action is needed across all the drivers of child poverty. However, the evidence is clear that there is no credible route to accelerating the reduction of child poverty that does not build on the value of social security support, and that increases to Scottish child payment 'are the most effective tool available.'[7]

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[3] 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.

[4] 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.

[5] Family Finances and Changing Realities, Investing in all our futures: improving the good the Scottish Child Payment can do, 2026.

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

[7] 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.

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.[8] Furthermore, some low-income families miss out on Scottish child payment all together. CPAG's Strengthening Social Security project highlighted how gaps in eligibility could be addressed to help families currently missing out to benefit from the payment. For example, changing the eligibility rules to allow families in temporary accommodation to receive the payment or creating a 12 week 'run on' so families can keep benefiting from the payment during temporary periods of lost eligibility caused by taking on more hours at work.

Of course there is no silver bullet to eradicating child poverty. As well as further action on social security, action must be taken across government and 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 child a decent start in life. This includes investment across employment, education, housing and childcare, ensuring the goal of preventing and ending child poverty is at the heart of policy across government.

What is in the Programme for Government?

Increase in Scottish child payment for under ones

While the increase in Scottish child payment for children under one is welcome, but there needs to be more investment in the payment for all children, ultimately rising to £55 by the end of this parliament. There also needs to be commitment to close gaps in entitlement that leave some low-income families to currently miss out.

Action to support take-up of benefits and investment in welfare rights support

Action to support the take-up of benefits, especially promoting take-up of reserved benefits is welcome. However, there needs to be increased long-term investment in welfare rights services as an integral element of whole family support.

Commitment to expand the childcare offer from 9 months to end of primary school including expansion of breakfast clubs

The commitment to expanding early learning and school age childcare is welcome. There needs to be more clarity on how capacity can be built in order for this to be delivered so that childcare is available, affordable and flexible – especially for parents working shifts or irregular hours.

Employability support for parents

75% of children in poverty live in a household where at least one parent is working.[9] Investment to provide employability support for parents, especially to overcome financial barriers such as transport and childcare is welcome. The upcoming review of employability support must address the needs of parents including those in the priority family groups.

We know that families can lose entitlement to vital support from Scottish child payment if their earnings temporarily increase. This could be avoided if entitlement to Scottish child payment could be extended for 12 weeks to cover temporary disruption to entitlement caused by fluctuating work patterns.

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[8] Social Security Scotland, Table 11, Scottish child payment statistics to December 2025, February 2026.

[9] Scottish Government, Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2022-2025, March 2026.

Support with school costs

The Programme for Government re-states the commitment to further expand Free School Meals in primary school. Further detail is required for the timescale of this commitment being realized. CPAG are also calling for eligibility to be expanded at least to all secondary school pupils receiving Scottish child payment.

There also needs to be more investment to help with the basics that allow pupils to learn and feel included at school. This includes keeping uniform costs low and extending clothing grants, providing 1:1 devices and connectivity and ensure equal access to resources.

Whole family support

The provision of whole family support will provide help for families. Many families only get all the benefits that they are entitled to once they have received support from an expert welfare rights adviser. Therefore, it is vital that income maximisation is an integral element of whole family support.

Conclusion

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.

The Scottish Government's current Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, *Bringing Hope, Building Futures,* published in March, laid out a framework for further action in the right areas but falls far short of the action that is needed. This Programme for Government should have been an opportunity to build on that progress.

For more information on the action that CPAG would like to see in this parliament, see CPAG's Programme for Scottish Government 2026-2031.

For more information or to discuss the contents of this briefing in more detail contact Maria Marshall, Policy Officer: mmarshall@cpagscotland.org.uk

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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