CHILD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

Impact report

2025/2026



Spotlight on policy change

The first UK-wide child poverty strategy in nearly a decade was published in December 2025. It contains two key policies that CPAG played a significant role in securing. Much of our work this year focused on pushing for the **full scrapping of the two-child limit**, which the UK government announced it would do in November 2025.

Investment in our social security system is the key to lifting children out of poverty, and we used our analysis, parents' voices, behind the scenes influencing, and public campaigning to relentlessly make the case that any credible child poverty strategy needed to include the full scrapping of the two-child limit.

> **'I also thank the many campaigners, charities and others that have shaped this strategy by working with us to develop the best case for lifting children out of poverty. I particularly pay tribute to the Child Poverty Action Group and Save the Children, which have provided enormous support in making the case that this is not just necessary for children's life chances but essential for our society.'**
> Bridget Phillipson, then Secretary of State for Education, House of Commons, 8 December 2025

Our substantial analysis over the year showed that abolishing the two-child limit would be, by far, the most cost-effective intervention government could make. Anything less than full abolition would be throwing away the chance to make the most efficient intervention, pound for pound. And there was little prospect of reducing child poverty unless the two-child limit was abolished because it continued to push children into poverty at a rate of 109 a day, a projection that was used widely.

We also worked jointly with those who work directly with children to draw out the impact of child poverty and why investment in the social security system is so important in tackling it. We worked with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health to show how rising levels of child poverty are affecting professionals working on the front line of children's health, and that as well as being bad for children's health, poverty is placing a healthcare system already stretched thin under much more considerable strain.

Our poll of primary and secondary teachers in England, conducted by the National Education Union (NEU), showed the toll that child poverty is taking at school: 86 per cent of teachers said child poverty is limiting opportunity for their pupils.

As well as getting media attention for our evidence, we shared it in numerous meetings with politicians, civil servants and advisers to make the case for this investment. We showed MPs what the impact was in their own constituencies.

CPAG in numbers

350,000 350,000 children lifted out of poverty immediately by the scrapping of the two-child limit.

500,000 At least 500,000 additional children in England to benefit from expanded free school meals.

28,620 28,620 people supported through our helplines for frontline workers and advisers.

We also worked with diverse organisations to call for the policy to be scrapped in full. We continue to host the End Child Poverty coalition, which kept 140+ organisations together behind the call to end the policy and led multiple actions to apply pressure.

As part of our strategic litigation work, we supported two mothers in a legal challenge to the rules on the two-child limit non-consensual conception exemption, or 'the rape clause'. While the legal case was not successful, we were in contact with a number of women who were denied access to support because they were not eligible, or who experienced difficulties accessing support even where they were eligible, and shared one woman's experience of getting support she needed for her children with MPs, provoking a significant number of responses.

We briefed MPs and peers as the Bill to scrap the policy went through parliament, highlighting the benefits it would have.

In the meantime, we brought our policy and rights expertise together to inform the approach the Scottish government was taking to deliver on the previously secured commitment to mitigate the two-child limit in Scotland from April 2026 through a Social Security Scotland two-child limit payment. Thankfully abolition at UK level meant this payment was not required.

We have campaigned for many years for an **expansion of who is eligible for free school meals**. We have repeatedly calculated and reported on the number of children in poverty who miss out on means-tested free school meals, a figure which gets a lot of traction. We were therefore delighted when the government announced that all school-age children in families receiving universal credit in England would be eligible for free school meals from September 2026, meaning free school meals will now reach nearly all children in poverty in England.



In addition to research on the numbers of children who currently miss out on free school meals, we published a report called *Priced out of School* which highlighted how lack of money at home plays a role in school attendance. We polled young people across the UK aged 11-18 and the findings show that secondary aged pupils are missing school because they don't have what they need including money for meals (as well as the right uniform and money for transport). 16 per cent of all 11-18-year-olds said they had missed school because they didn't have something they needed. Of pupils who had missed school, 23 per cent said they didn't attend because they didn't have the money to pay for school meals, while 20 per cent said difficulty affording a packed lunch had kept them off. Children in receipt of free school meals told us they are sometimes lending their free school meal allowances to friends who need food. We also updated our analysis on the minimum cost of education, which highlighted that food during the school day is now the biggest essential cost that families face.

The expansion will provide much needed relief to many families but there is also work to be done to ensure all children who become newly eligible will benefit from the policy. The expansion is also an important step towards our long-term vision of all children being able to access universal free school meals in every UK nation.

Delivering our objectives

Working with people with lived experience
We continue to support Changing Realities, parents and carers living on a low income working alongside researchers at the University of Glasgow and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Changing Realities had structured engagement with the UK government during the development of the child poverty strategy. This included meetings with ministers; answering 'Big questions' asked by officials and ministers about various aspects of the strategy; informing the narrative framing of the strategy; contributing a foreword to the strategy; and being involved in launch events with the PM and other ministers.

> **'Our involvement in this strategy has strengthened our belief that lasting solutions come when policies are shaped with people, not just for them. We are proud to have contributed and we remain hopeful that through sharing our experiences, we will help create a better future for all children.'**
> Extract from Changing Realities parents' foreword to the child poverty strategy

Changing Realities also published a comprehensive report with IPPR on parents' priorities for the strategy. As always, Changing Realities advocated for people with lived experience to be part of the policy making process and for policies that people with lived experience want to see.

Changing Realities also undertook work on childcare and support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Participants met with the Scottish First Minister, with the Minister for Social Security on the universal credit review, and with the then Secretary of State for Education to discuss SEND reforms.

Working with young people
Our work with young people continued to develop this year. We held our first Cost of the School Day Young People's Summit in Glasgow, with young people from across Scotland coming together to set out how they think the Scottish government should tackle poverty in schools in the coming years. The young people spoke directly to First Minister John Swinney about the need to ensure no one is left out at school because of family income. The First Minister then met young people at Bute House. Ahead of the Scottish election, children and young people also took part in an event at Holyrood.

The Young People's Poverty and Education Manifesto, *School Shouldn't Cost*, brought together views from thousands of young people in Scotland about what should happen to remove barriers and make school better for children and young people on low incomes.



First Minister of Scotland with delegates at the Young People's Summit

In Wales, our Youth Voice Champions researched the impact of school costs on teenagers and developed the *Cost of the School Day Manifesto for Wales*, calling on the new Welsh government to make school more affordable and ensure everyone has the food, resources and opportunities to make the most of their education. We also held a youth voice event in South Wales, bringing together children and young people who had worked with CPAG to carry out research on poverty in their schools. Children shared their findings and recommendations on how to bring down the cost of the school day with schools, local authorities, stakeholders and civil servants from Welsh government.

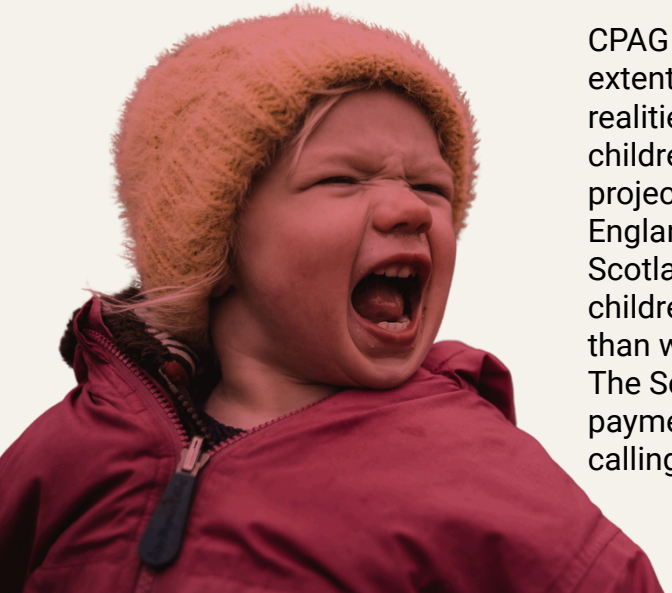
Members of our London Youth Panel made a submission to the UK government's Curriculum and Assessment Review and informed our response to the Milburn review on young people and work. They co-chaired a Youth Town Hall event at the Labour Party Conference, attended an event at No.11 hosted by Rachel Reeves, and a Youth Panel member was interviewed by Amol Rajan at CPAG's 60th anniversary event.

Social security advocacy
With our benefits expertise, and evidence from frontline advisers that feeds into our Early Warning System, we continue to advocate for improvements so that our social security system works better for children and families. This included CPAG having core participant status in modules 8 and 9 of the Covid Inquiry, which looked at the treatment of children in the pandemic and the government's economic response respectively.

> **'The best way to ensure that… families on the lowest incomes are protected in a pandemic is to make sure that we have a robust social security system in normal times because that would mean that they're… more financially resilient going into a pandemic and then the system is able to be pulled as an effective policy lever to protect incomes.'**
> Head of Policy Sophie Howes giving evidence to the Covid Inquiry.

There was a positive development with the announcement that the standard allowance of universal credit would be increased by more than inflation in April 2026, but it does remain inadequate. This also came alongside a cut to the health element of universal credit. We contributed to opposition to cuts to disability benefits over this period, showing the impact of cuts on child poverty and how they undermine government's ambitions to reduce it.

We repeatedly called for the benefit cap to be scrapped as part of the child poverty strategy, but it remains in place (with mitigations in Scotland and Northern Ireland). We published research showing that families with children are disproportionately affected by the cap, and that it leaves all affected families with very little to live on once housing costs are paid. In inner London, a lone parent family with three children can be left with just £3 a week to live on after paying rent. In Brighton, a similar family would be left with just £89 a week after rent. We will continue to campaign against this policy.



CPAG is a key project partner on Safety Nets, which explores the extent of the devolution of social security within the UK and the realities, risks and opportunities this poses for families with children. We were also the policy partner in the Family Finances project which compared families' experiences in Scotland and England to understand the impact additional cash support in Scotland has had. We found that over 70,000 fewer Scottish children are living in either material deprivation or food insecurity than would have been the case without Scottish child payment. The Scottish government committed to an increase in the payment to the £40 a week that CPAG and partners have been calling for, but only for babies under one.

We published the final report of our Strengthening Scottish Social Security project funded by The Robertson Trust. This project brought together the expertise of parents, carers, frontline advisers and welfare rights workers in Scotland to explore why some families on a low income are excluded from or not benefiting fully from Scottish child payment and other Scottish family payments.

Work in education

We continue to make the case that household income is critical when it comes to educational outcomes, with money at home being the strongest predictor of how well a child will do at school. Our education work enables us to push for change within the education system to support children from poorer backgrounds, and to push for action on family incomes outside the school gates.

In addition to needing free school meals for more children, we have built our evidence base on the other costs that need addressing for children and young people to be able to fully participate at school. Our *Minimum Cost of Education* research showed a growing gap between costs and income is making it harder for children from lower-income families to make the most of their time at school.

Our project work in schools has continued in London, supporting children and young people in 20 schools (during this phase) to explore poverty and make recommendations to school and academy trust leaders about the changes that are needed. Schools have implemented changes including reducing uniform costs, enabling parents to pay for school trips in instalments and inviting students to meet with caterers to provide feedback. In Scotland, we supported young people from the 360 schools in our Cost of the School Day Voice network to come together through online meetings, events and committees to explore poverty, discuss support that works and identify what else needs to change both in their settings and nationally. The Voice network supports young people to be active and lead on anti-poverty action in their schools.

Meanwhile in Wales Our *Cost of the School Day: Every Voice Heard* project ended this year. An independent evaluation of the project found it had empowered learners to use their voice to influence change in their schools and communities, building their confidence to speak openly about poverty.

We use the evidence we gain from such projects to inform our policy and advocacy work, and in practical ways such as delivering training for teachers on how to reduce financial pressures for families and ensure schools and classrooms are poverty sensitive (working with the National Education Union). In Scotland, ongoing evidence from young people and schools helped to inform our range of well-used resources for teachers and school staff, supporting them to understand poverty, reduce costs, tackle stigma and boost family incomes.



The child poverty strategy and expansion of free school meals policy build on earlier changes introduced in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which CPAG undertook considerable advocacy work on. Now it has passed, the Act limits school uniform costs and introduces free breakfast clubs in primary schools in England, which began to be rolled out in April 2025. From working closely with children and young people and championing their voices, we know that these changes will make a vital difference to their time at school and family finances.

Supporting the advisers helping families
We continue to deliver our highly-valued second-tier service for advisers who support the public. Our free expert social security advice lines are open five days a week for frontline workers and MPs' caseworkers, helping people get the social security support they need. We run a bespoke service for Trussell, supporting advisers working in food banks. CPAG Welfare Rights is the online home of all our welfare rights information, advice and tools. These services help people get the social security support they need, maximise family incomes and reduce child poverty.

The positive changes we have achieved this year were made possible thanks to supporters like you. We are grateful to the almost 1,650 individuals and organisations who donated or raised funds, our many funders and corporate partners, 730 individual members and 324 organisational members, and 29,918 supporters who contributed to our efforts to prevent and end child poverty. For every £1 of our expenditure in 2025/26, 92p was spent on our charitable activities.

Thank you. We hope you will continue to support us in whatever way you can.



Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) 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. CPAG is a charity registered in England and Wales (registration number 294841) and in Scotland (registration number SC039339), 30 Micawber Street, London N1 7TB.