

Covid-19, child poverty and the need for urgent action

The End Child Poverty Coalition believes that urgent action is required to help families to cope with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. We are calling on the Scottish Government to address this need by providing interim payments to low-income families while they wait for the Scottish Child Payment to be delivered in 2021. This immediate measure is a key stepping-stone towards sustained action to ensure no child lives in poverty in Scotland.

Background: child poverty and the Covid-19 pandemic

Even before Covid-19, nearly one in four children in Scotland were growing up in poverty.ⁱ The pandemic has hit low-income families disproportionately hard; deepening poverty and dragging more families into financial insecurity.ⁱⁱ Women's poverty rates, and subsequently child poverty rates, will rise as a result of low-paid women being at particular risk of Covid-19 job disruption, including unemployment, enforced reduction of hours and being furloughed.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Scottish Government response to the crisis so far has included the continuation of support for families eligible for free school meals throughout the holidays (either via cash support, vouchers, or the delivery of meals), additional investment in the Scottish Welfare Fund and commitment to prioritise the delivery of Scottish Child Payment (£10 per week per child by early 2021), which is wholly welcome.^{iv} Our members have also welcomed support from the Wellbeing Fund, which has helped third sector organisations provide crisis support and practical and emotional help for families, including through emergency assistance funds and scale-up of money advice services, which have provided a lifeline to many families.

However, as yet, there has been no additional direct financial support specifically aimed at children and their caregivers in response to the pandemic; either at Scotland or UK level. This comes despite a surge in childcare needs as a result of measures taken to reduce the spread of the virus; needs which have largely been met by women.^v This increase has severe short and long term risk to families' incomes, as mothers are more likely to have left or lost their jobs over lockdown or to have seen earnings reduced.^{vi}

Emergency assistance funds are running out fast and can't keep pace with the level of support needed. **Initial analysis suggests the number of children in poverty will soar, unless we act now.**^{vii} As we begin to move from a crisis phase to a recovery phase our organisations believe that a more preventative and sustainable approach is required, given that discretionary funds do not provide rights-based support for all in need.

The call from End Child Poverty (ECP) members in Scotland

End Child Poverty members continue to call on the Chancellor to urgently top up UK-wide benefits that go to families to help with the costs of raising children. But there are also levers at the Scottish Government's disposal to both relieve immediate financial need, and to ensure families always have an income that, at a minimum, protects them from poverty. The Scottish Child Payment will provide a welcome boost when it is delivered, next year, but families urgently need help now. Preventative action is required to stop families from falling into severe poverty and to prevent children's rights from being breached. We are therefore calling on the Scottish Government to:

- Bridge the gap to the initial roll out of the Scottish Child Payment by **providing direct and immediate financial support to low income families**, at least equivalent in value

¹ Payments were due to begin in late 2020, starting with low-income families with children under six, before rolling out to all children under 16 by 2022. However, amid the coronavirus crisis, delivery is delayed, with the Scottish Government citing lack of capacity; it hopes the payment will open to applications by the end of 2020, but this is not guaranteed.

to the forthcoming Scottish Child Payment (£10 per week per child, around £250 to cover a six month period of coronavirus crisis and initial recovery).

- Continue to **prioritise the development and delivery of the Scottish Child Payment.**

A number of delivery options that could directly support this proposal, using existing payments and mechanisms at local and national level, have been outlined in a recent [letter](#)^{viii} from over 100 organisations and academics to the First Minister, by IPPR,^{ix} by the Fraser of Allander Institute^x and the JRF^{xi}. **These include the use of school clothing grants payments and increasing the value of Best Start Foods.**

Appendix one

Why is this necessary? Evidence of impact

Children and families that End Child Poverty members work alongside are telling us about severe and increasing levels of need.^{xii} Almost half of families surveyed in Scotland by Save the Children and the JRF reported a reduction in income since March despite 86% reporting rising household costs,^{xiii} while analysis by IPPR found that nearly half of families with children in Scotland were in serious financial difficulty or struggling to make ends meet.^{xiv}

In its most recent 'Children, Young People and Families Evidence and Intelligence Report,'^{xv} the Scottish Government reported that Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund has seen a 1400% increase in applications since March, with 90% of applications requesting assistance with the provision of food while One Parent Families Scotland have delivered 1,452 food parcels to lone parent families.

Since the beginning of March, Children 1st Parentline has reported a 158% increase of calls about finances and employment and the Scottish Welfare Fund saw an 88% increase in requests for assistance in April, compared with the same period last year.^{xvi}

Families are reaching out to us with bare cupboards and fridges, struggling to cope with the impact of income loss, forced to make increasingly difficult choices. Income crisis is being disproportionately experienced by the very priority groups set out in the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan: BAME families, women,^{xvii} lone parents, families with a disabled adult or child, young mothers, families with a child under one, and larger families.

Gendered patterns of care are being replicated during lockdown, and in many cases magnified. School and nursery closures, and increased caring responsibilities in the home have drastically affected women's ability to do paid work. Indeed, evidence highlights that women with caring responsibilities in paid work have reduced their paid working hours substantially, and by more than their male counterparts. Among those working in February 2020, mothers are now 9 percentage points less likely to still be in paid work than fathers.^{xviii} This, coupled with women's disproportionate risk of furlough, reduced hours and redundancy, has placed women and their children at greater risk of poverty. The Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan highlighted women's low pay as a key concern in tackling child poverty and Covid-19 has made it increasingly impossible to tackle child poverty without tackling women's inequality in the labour market.

While we recognise the publication of the child poverty progress report has had to be delayed, this does not mean that action should be deprioritised. Now more than ever we must do more to stop income crises amongst those who are most at risk.

Appendix two

Crisis to recovery: family incomes at the heart of social & economic renewal

The rising levels of child poverty in Scotland are unacceptable and urgent action is required. It is a **fundamental breach of children's rights** under Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) for Scotland not to uphold children's right to an adequate standard of living. The Children's Commissioner has called for an emergency package of financial support for families on low incomes as part of the recommendations in the Independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment on the Response to Covid-19 in Scotland.^{xix}

Rising child poverty is entirely inconsistent with the 'national renewal' called for by the Scottish Government's Advisory Group on Economic Recovery^{xx} and the First Minister's welcome championing of a wellbeing economy.^{xxi} Scotland's approach to economic and social renewal must have ending child poverty at its heart if progress is to be maintained toward meeting the interim targets (2023-24) and statutory 2030 child poverty targets and its commitment to incorporate the UNCRC in this parliamentary cycle. While emergency assistance funding and the investment in the Scottish Welfare Fund is welcome, it is not sustainable or enough to meet the rising level of need.

Crucially, Scottish Government's necessary focus on family support to implement the recommendations of The Promise must be accompanied by a concurrent focus on alleviating child poverty and addressing urgent financial needs. Family support without ensuring that families have the means to bring up their children is not sufficient. The Promise is clear that *"when a family lacks financial resources, when they face sub-standard service provision, when the streets they walk are less safe than in other parts of town, when homes are cramped and when keeping food on the table is a struggle, meeting all the needs of a child can be challenging."*^{xxii}

The Scottish Government's evidence paper highlights that *"ensuring adequate family income is the key challenge to be addressed to improve outcomes for all [children and young people]."*^{xxiii} Income adequacy is a fundamental part of holistic whole family support. The first step towards this is ensuring that there is bridge between now, when many families are requiring urgent help, and the implementation of the Scottish Child Payment.

Sustained action is then needed to address the systemic causes of low income for too many families as part of a step-change in how we value those with caring responsibilities, including those looking after children. Alongside improving social security, this includes: adopting gendered approaches to labour market policymaking to tackle labour market barriers for women with caring responsibilities; utilising public procurement to drive improvements in the quality of work – including addressing low-pay, insecure work and insufficient working hours; addressing the undervaluation of "women's work", including social care and childcare; tackling the gender pay gap; and redistributing childcare responsibilities, while boosting the provision of affordable, accessible and flexible childcare.^{xxiv} The implementation of the extended funded childcare entitlement must, therefore, remain a key priority for the Scottish Government in the aftermath of the crisis.

All children have the right to be safe, warm, fed and to be able to play and learn during this crisis and beyond. We must ensure children's right to an adequate standard of living is met now, and for good. Every tool at Scotland's disposal must be used to that end.

ⁱ <https://www.gov.scot/collections/child-poverty-statistics/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.ippr.org/blog/covid-19-how-are-families-with-children-faring-so-far>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.closesthegap.org.uk/content/resources/Disproportionate-Disruption---The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-womens-labour-market-equality.pdf>

^{iv} <https://www.gov.scot/policies/social-security/scottish-child-payment/>

^v <https://oxfamapps.org/scotland/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Making-Care-Count-in-Scotland-Oxfam-Scotland-July-2020-1.pdf>

^{vi} https://www.engage.org.uk/content/publications/1594974358_Gender--unpaid-work--the-impact-of-Covid-19-on-womens-caring-roles.pdf

^{vii} <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/estimating-poverty-impacts-of-coronavirus>

^{viii} <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/open-letter-first-minister-coronavirus-support-low-income-families>

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