

Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026-31 Call for written evidence

March, 2025



**One Parent
Families Scotland**
changing lives, challenging poverty

About One Parent Families Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) is the national organisation for single parent families. Our vision is of a Scotland where single parent families are celebrated in all their diversity, are treated fairly and live free from discrimination and poverty.

We support family wellbeing, empower single parents with the right advice and information and enable parents to access training, employment and education. Our national advice and information service and family hubs in six local areas reach thousands of single parent families each year.

We campaign for improvements in the here and now and for structural and systemic change alongside single parents who are experts in their dual role of caregiving and providing for their children. We take an intersectional approach, recognising most single parents are women and that many racially minoritised, disabled and young single parents face multiple structural barriers affecting access to services and opportunities.

Question 1.1:

Do you think these are the right themes to focus on?

OPFS agrees that the themes set out within the consultation, as follows, represent some of the correct priority areas for the next Delivery Plan (see 1.2 for further information):

1. **Increasing earned incomes by supporting and providing opportunities for parents and carers, to enter, sustain and progress in work.** This includes through the likes of employability support and the provision of essential infrastructure such as childcare and transport.
2. **Reducing the costs of living and maximising incomes from social security to allow families to live dignified lives and meet their basic needs.** This includes through the likes of social security, affordable homes, and advice services.
3. **Delivering holistic and whole family support to improve outcomes and wellbeing and enable families to better engage with other services that directly increase their incomes.** This includes through action focused on preventing families falling into poverty and wider community-based support.

4. **Supporting children and young people to reach their full potential and to break the cycle of poverty in the longer term.** This includes through the likes of early years support, education, and post-school transitions.

Within these, we support the call from the End Child Poverty Coalition to separate priority area 2 into two separate headings:

1. **Maximising incomes from social security to allow families to live dignified lives and meet their basic needs.**
2. **Reducing the costs of living for families including through affordable homes.**

However, while we welcome recognition of the need for anti-poverty work in these areas, we need to see further and faster action overall to achieve statutory child poverty targets by 2030. This will need to include a detailed breakdown of how specific actions taken will impact on different groups and should include information on what targeted interventions are available for families at higher risk of experiencing poverty - as outlined by the six priority family groups. This should be accompanied by concerted and sustainable investment if we are to realise the targets within the established timeline.

Question 1.2:

Are there other key strategic themes we should consider?

In addition to the themes above, we would encourage the next Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan to include the following:

1. **Supporting parents within priority families to gain further and higher education qualifications which enable access to jobs with higher earnings and improved sustainability.**

For further information on this proposed theme, please see link entitled '[Why access to further & higher education is important for single parents.](#)'

As you think about each theme, noting the plan must set out measures for the purpose of meeting the 2030 child poverty targets, we would also be keen to hear your views on any or all of the following questions:

Question 2.1:

What is working well and what actions should Scottish Government and partners either continue to do or to do more of?

Social Security General Comments: Values and Ethos

Social Security Scotland (SSS) takes a different approach to social security than that of the UK system. OPFS was involved in the initial consultations when SSS was being established, and we strongly support Scottish social security principles being based on dignity, fairness and respect.

Scottish Child Payment

As is apparent from the reduction in child poverty levels from 24% prior to 2021 to 22% in 2023-24, at a time where child poverty levels rose across the rest of the UK, the Scottish Child Payment has had an impact on overall levels of child poverty in Scotland since its rise to £25 in November 2022. OPFS therefore strongly supports the continuation of, and further increases in, the Scottish Child Payment throughout the life of the 2026-31 Delivery Plan as a priority action to continue the reduction in child poverty.

Best Start Grants and Best Start Foods

The suite of Best Start Grants has had a very positive impact on parent's family finances. Parents have told us the grants have prevented them from going into debt or having to cut down on other essential household spending, such as for food and bills. They have also told us that the grants reduce financial stress and enable them to feel prepared for key transitional stages in their child's life. These payments should continue to be increased in line with inflation.

Benefit Cap Mitigation

Since January 2023, the Scottish Government has committed to fully funding mitigation of the benefit cap, as far as is possible within devolved powers. The funds allocated to Local Authorities for benefit cap mitigation are based on the maximum cost of the cap to claimants in Scotland. This policy aims to provide support to households whose benefit entitlements have been reduced by the benefit cap.

Mitigating the benefit cap is absolutely the right thing to do. Alongside mitigating Westminster's bedroom tax, the increased funding and improved support for families affected by the benefit cap has been welcomed by the many single parents who have been pushed into hardship by this policy.

Approximately 66% of all capped households in Scotland consist of single parents with children (96% of whom are women). Among those affected, 57% are single parents with three or more children. We would hope the next Delivery Plan will **continue to focus on ensuring there is maximum take-up of this vital mitigation.**

Carer Support

The Scottish Government has recognised the important role that unpaid carers play within Scottish society by making improvements to the now devolved Carer Support Payment. This payment replaces Carers Allowance in Scotland and is administered by Social Security Scotland.

Those who are in receipt of Carers Support Payment also qualify for two supplementary payments. This provided an extra £577.20 per year to carers who qualified in 2024/25. These supplementary payments are only available in Scotland and provide a vital extra support payment to carers to cover additional costs of caring.

In addition, students in Scotland who are aged 20 years or older, and meet the other qualifying criteria, can qualify for the Carers Support Payment. Students in other parts of the U.K. do not qualify for Carers Allowance.

Over the coming year, Social Security Scotland are looking to develop further changes to this benefit, including an additional payment if caring for more than one person. We also believe that the Carer Support Payment level should be increased in recognition of the higher costs unpaid carers face, many of whom are parents, and that the wage threshold be increased as well to provide greater support to working carers.

Two Child Limit

The Scottish Government's 2024 announcement of its intention to mitigate the two child-limit in Scotland is welcomed and estimated to lift around 15,000 children out of poverty. While not included within the remit of the legislation at present, this strongly aligns with the principles established and committed to through the passing of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 – ensuring that all children are able to realise their right to benefit from social security (Article 26). The Act includes provisions encouraging the Scottish Government to maximise compliance with the UNCRC where possible, even in areas where legislation is reserved to the UK Government.

Employability and Sustainable Employment

1. No-One Left Behind

[‘No One Left Behind’](#), the Scottish Governments’ employability strategy, aims to be person centred and responsive to individual needs.

However, we are concerned that a very individualised model risks losing sight of the structural and systemic barriers that priority families, including single parents, encounter in the labour market.

The [latest NOLB statistics](#) show that the percentage of single parents who can sustain employment is very low.

The findings from [research](#) by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and OPFS highlights

the importance of understanding all the structural and individual barriers affecting single parent families and taking the time to address them.

The Scottish Government should therefore introduce bespoke employment support within NOLB for single parents – particularly in relation to improving access to higher level training courses, further education and adult apprenticeships/ILMs.

2. Sustainable Employment Pilot: Public Health Scotland and OPFS Partnership

In 2024, Public Health Scotland and OPFS were named finalists in the 'Employer Partnership' category at the ERSA 2024 Employability Awards for a jointly delivered lone parent partnership project - supporting single parents to access opportunities for training and employment. This work has been overwhelmingly positive, and we would like to see further opportunities for similar programmes replicated and built upon across Scotland. Participants in the pathway benefitted from: Pre-Employment Training: A six-week OPFS Academy programme covering work-family balance, financial planning, and essential skills, with guaranteed interviews for participants.

- Paid Employment Opportunities: The opportunity to apply for an 18-month work contract with Public Health Scotland.
- Skills Development: Access to SCQF Level 5 or 6 in Business Administration through the City of Glasgow College to enhance their skills and employability.
- Comprehensive Support: Holistic support and assistance covering childcare and travel costs to ease financial pressures.

Further information about the project can be found [here](#).

Holistic and Whole Family Support

With the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund due to come to an end in 2026, there is a need for renewed commitments to ensure that whole family support provisions continue throughout the life of the 2026-31 Delivery Plan.

In addition to ensuring that the ambitions outlined within Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), that every child is offered the right help at the right time from the right people, whole family support directly contributes to the alleviation of child poverty – maximising incomes and helping to break cycles of generational poverty longer term.

Question 2.2: Are there policies, actions or approaches that the Scottish Government and/or partners should either stop or do differently?

As members of the End Child Poverty Coalition, we support the following proposals to:

1. Provide resource to ensure everyone can access social security support through focused take-up campaigns and income-maximisation support and wherever possible, increased automation and simplification of the social security system.

2. Commit to measuring benefit uptake by ethnicity and disaggregating social security ethnicity data, to improve understanding of take-up by Black and minority ethnic families.
3. Work to close gaps in eligibility that see families missing out on Scottish child payment such as widening eligibility criteria and the ways in which parents and carers may demonstrate responsibility for a child.
4. Further utilise devolved tax powers to maximise resources to meet child poverty targets.

Question 2.3: Are there new policies, actions or approaches that Scottish Government should consider implementing?

Child Maintenance

While the Child Maintenance System is within the competence of the UK Government, there are actions that the Scottish Government can take to ensure that all children have the resources that they need to thrive.

Family separation can be one of the most difficult events in parents' and children's lives. Among the challenges arising from parents of a child living separately, one of the most difficult is money.

Money becomes such a challenge because expectations implicit in the labour market, the social security system, and the wider culture, are geared around a two-adult breadwinner-model: one parent (overwhelmingly a father) increases their earnings relative to peers without children, while the other (overwhelmingly a mother) steps away from the labour market to perform different forms of labour, managing the demands of bringing up children.

The majority of arrangements see children living primarily with one parent, and that parent being their mother in 87% of case. In the absence of child maintenance payments, children of separated parents therefore face an increased risk of financial insecurity as the earnings of the adult they live with are constrained by the demands of bringing up children, and the threadbare social security system generally does not make allowance for this structural disadvantage.

This dynamic is revealed starkly in the child poverty statistics. In 2022/23, 44% of children living with one adult were in poverty, versus 25% of children living with two adults.

In order to address this, we believe that the Scottish Government should explicitly feature child maintenance within the next Delivery Plan – with a commitment to undertake systematic signposting of child maintenance support within financial advice and income maximisation services. This should additionally form part of funding specifications for future family support services.

Mitigating the Young Parent Penalty

In 2013, the UK Government introduced Universal Credit as a new system of social security, replacing an array of legacy benefits such as Jobseekers' Allowance, Income Support and Employment Support Allowance and Tax Credits. While this new system did bring a range of

benefits under one unified umbrella, it also added aged-based eligibility rules for parents under 25. This meant that young parents would now be entitled to a lower amount than their older counterparts when compared to the legacy system.

Now in 2025, the result of this discriminatory policy has ensured that young single parents under the age of 25 are £83.16 (20%) worse off every month than their older counterparts, with that amount rising to £130.55 for couples. Yet, despite this lower income, we know young parents do not actually have lower costs than other families. The DWP's provided rationale that young parents are more likely to live with their own parents clearly falters in the face of evidence from OPFS work with families across Scotland, which found young parents were considerably less likely than other young people to live with their own parents. This injustice of income disparity is then further deepened when considering young parent's reduced access to alternatives to social security. They may experience multiple barriers to employment such as a lack of affordable, flexible childcare, lower educational qualifications and work experience, and pregnancy and maternity discrimination.

We are calling on the Scottish Government to provide a top-up through the Scottish Child Payment to all young parents in receipt of Universal Credit as part of the next Delivery Plan. At a minimum, this payment should bring young parent families' support through social security in line with that received by parents aged 25 and over in the same circumstances.

Best Start Foods

Best Start Foods is a pre-paid card where money is paid every four weeks - to help families with young children, or a baby on the way, with the cost of healthy food. It can also be used to buy first infant formula.

Families can be eligible for Best Start Foods, no matter their income, if they receive Universal Credit, tax credits or qualifying benefit, and are pregnant or have a child under the age of three.

Changes were recently made to 'Best Start Foods' to better align this payment with Best Start Grants and the Scottish Child Payment and to enhance access for families – changes which have been supported by OPFS. In addition to this, going forward we would like to see further improvements to accessibility, through utilisation of the 'cash first' model as with the other family payments.

Single parents have told OPFS that using a card can be demeaning, and that they have faced challenges using them at various supermarkets. If they are unable to use the card to pay, then parents can be left having to return food for their children.

Parents should have choices in relation to what food they buy for their families, especially in the face of an increasing cost of living.

We also believe that there are a significant administrative costs involved in the operation of the current card system, and that supermarkets have different criteria for what goods the card can be used for. If the payment was made in a similar manner to the other family benefits, these issues could be resolved by moving to a system of automated payment. Social Security Scotland already uses this BACS approach for parents impacted by disability and very young parents.

Public Debt and School Meals Debt

Low-income families, including many single parent families, in Scotland are facing a debt crisis. This includes debts incurred in relation to council tax payments, rent arrears, and school meal debt: debts which trap families in poverty. Government intervention is essential to alleviate this crushing debt burden for disadvantaged families - enabling them to thrive.

The state must transition from a punitive debt collection approach to one that supports families out of financial hardship. Positive Government interventions will not only alleviate financial strain but also improve mental health, strengthen family wellbeing, and support at risk families: including those facing homelessness or the potential loss of their children to the care system.

Public debt reform must be a key focus of the Scottish Government's child poverty strategy. Specifically, to eradicate the need for school meal debt in Scotland, we are calling for:

- The School Meal Debt Fund to be made permanent.
- Free school meals to be extended to all children of primary school age initially, and later to all secondary school children.

Digital Inclusion

Pre-existing inequality means that single parents across Scotland are often digitally excluded, at a time when connectivity is more important than ever.

There is a clear and extensive digital divide in Scotland (and the UK as a whole).¹ The largest determinant of digital access is a person's socio-economic grouping.

With most single parents living on a low income, and through feedback from parents using our local services, we know from experience that many are digitally excluded.

Single parents need to have the technology, connectivity and the skills to connect with public services and to be able to improve their access to education, training and employment.

Tackling digital exclusion should be one of the priorities in the next Delivery Plan – which should see digital access not just as service delivery or technology, but as a foundational layer that enables interactions across government, services and society.

Question 2.4: How can Scottish Government and partners work differently to ensure seamless, integrated supported for families? What prevents this?

Siloed Systems

For the single parent families that we support at OPFS, we know that challenges are often multifaceted, with need to consider and coordinate a range of different interacting systems such as social security, employment, education, transport, childcare, and healthcare. These systems are often complex, and difficult to navigate without assistance – something that we are able to offer assistance with through our local services across Scotland and our national helpline.

However, going forward, to ensure that families are able to receive the support that they are entitled to, a more person-centred, trauma-informed, and accessible approach to systems design would be hugely beneficial.

Childcare

Accessible, affordable, and flexible childcare is critical for supporting single parents, the majority (92%) of whom are women, in achieving economic stability and escaping poverty. Childcare is a vital social infrastructure that plays a key role in the Scottish Government's efforts to reduce child poverty. While reforms, such as the introduction of 1140 funded hours, are positive steps forward, significant gaps remain in ensuring childcare meets the unique needs of single parent families.

Childcare is a lifeline for single parents, enabling them to access the labour market, secure stable employment, and support their families. However, the lack of affordable and flexible childcare options often forces single parents into low-paid, part-time, or insecure work. These limitations perpetuate poverty and reduce opportunities for career progression and financial security.

Going forward, we would like to see an expanded childcare offering made available – allowing parents greater flexibility around working patterns and therefore facilitating enhanced access to the labour market. This should involve:

1. A universal funded entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged 6 months and above that is free at the point of use for all families.
2. A high-quality service which delivers positive outcomes for children and realises children's rights.
3. A diverse and skilled childcare workforce that is valued, fairly paid, and gender balanced.
4. Flexible delivery that enables families to access childcare when they need and want it.
5. Work towards a childcare system that is not based on profit making.

The importance of this is paramount for families, with one parent supported by our Childcare Connector service telling us:

"I have not worked since my daughter was born; she is now 6 years old. I had thought that I would return to work when my daughter started primary school, but I was unable to find a job that would fit in with her school hours, I don't have any friends or family that could help me with school drop-off and pick-up, and after school care was so expensive, I couldn't see how I would be able to afford it.

On meeting with the childcare connector service, I was able to work out my finances, apply for help from the DWP Flexible Support Fund for the deposit and apply for money towards my childcare costs. It was like the whole world had opened up for me, allowing me to go to work knowing that my daughter was safe, well and happy."

Question 2.5: What more can we do to understand the challenges being faced by the family at greatest risk of poverty, including the six priority families identified to ensure their specific and interconnected needs are met?

Lived experience should be at the heart of any decisions made about priority groups – as they are the people who best understand the challenges that they face. In order to understand the challenges being faced by single parent families, we would be happy to be involved in further engagement on this topic, as our work is informed directly by the experiences of single parents across the country.

Single parents, by definition, are the sole care giver in a family and have responsibility for all the roles that may otherwise be undertaken by two parents working together. They do not

benefit from the parenting and mutual personal support that can be available from co-parenting. Single parents are also, by default, the main earner in the family, but have less time to devote to performing in this role. The demands of childcare can mean that opportunities for employment, training and education are limited. Single parents have to balance the roles of sole care giver and main breadwinner. The higher rates of unemployment, underemployment and low income in single parent families suggest that single parenthood has a negative impact on the breadwinner role.

Our 2022 report '[Living Without a Lifeline](#)' highlights further some of the key challenges experienced by single parent families in Scotland.

Question 2.6: What targeted action could be taken to tackle inequalities faced by marginalised groups, to help raise their incomes and improve their outcomes? This could include specialist support for one or more groups.

While it has been established that the six priority family groups are at higher risk of experiencing poverty, in some cases significantly higher, the Scottish Government to date has taken limited steps to demonstrate targeted interventions for these groups.

Despite this, we know that some of the priority families continue to have less access to, or lower rates of utilising, social security. This may be due to discrimination within legislation, such as is the case for young parents - through financial restrictions imposed by a 'young parent penalty' on Universal Credit eligibility. Additionally, it may be due to added complexities in accessing supports: with barriers including levels of knowledge surrounding Scottish and UK social security eligibility, otherwise navigating complex systems, or requiring access to materials in alternative languages or formats.

Some of the solutions to this may require changes to social security systems themselves, but others are more straightforward. For example, we know from our services across Scotland that income maximisation services can substantially increase household budgets. Provision of such services does not require formal changes to policy or legislation, but instead, involves ensuring that these services are available in the right places, at the right time, for the communities who need them most. This can result in an increase in uptake of existing social security support and have a direct substantial impact on levels of poverty experienced by priority families.

Question 2.7: Please use this text box to enter anything else you feel is relevant that we may have missed, this may include any research, evaluation or findings from consultations that you have undertaken which are relevant to this call for evidence. You can attach any published reports, research on lived experience of poverty, or internal pieces of work you may hold along with your submission.

Please find linked a series of reports, research, and evaluations which may be of value to considerations:

- OPFS, [OPFS and Public Health Scotland recognised for pioneering lone parent employment partnership](#), 2024
- OPFS, [Pre-Budget Briefing](#), 2024
- Fife Gingerbread, IPPR Scotland and OPFS, [Child Maintenance and its impact on child poverty and financial security for single parent families](#), 2024
- Fife Gingerbread, IPPR Scotland and OPFS, [Test and Learn: Understanding the approach to child maintenance in Fife Evaluation Report](#), 2024
- OPFS, [Scottish Parliament Social Justice and Social Security Committee Post Legislative Scrutiny of the Child Poverty \(Scotland\) Act 2017](#), 2024
- OPFS, [Glasgow Service Evaluation](#), 2023
- OPFS and Close the Gap, [A Childcare System for All](#), 2023
- OPFS, [Poverty-Proofing for Families in or on the Edges of Care](#), 2023
- OPFS, Young Parent Penalty Web Page



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