Scottish Parliament Election 2026

Single Parents' Manifesto

One Parent Families Scotland

changing lives, challenging poverty

Foreword

In Scotland, we believe in compassion, fairness and the right of every child to grow up free from poverty. Yet for too many families, especially those headed by single parents, this vision remains out of reach.

In 2023/24, 36% of children growing up in single parent families were trapped in poverty, significantly higher than the national average of 23% of all children within the same period. These numbers are a stark indicator of the structural barriers and policy choices that continue to deny single parents the security and opportunities they deserve.

As we look ahead to the 2026 Scottish Parliament elections, the next Scottish Government has the opportunity, and the responsibility, to take bolder, faster action to support families to thrive. Tackling the injustice of poverty must be a central priority. This can be achieved through targeted investment in social security, education, training, childcare - and by adopting a more progressive approach to taxation.

Informed by single parents, experts by experience, this Manifesto sets out the key changes that single parent families need to see by 2031. It lays out a path towards a Scotland where all families have equity of opportunity and choice. In their own words:

“Our economy was designed for a past that no longer serves our future. To challenge the climate crisis, soaring living costs and deepening inequality, we need bold, systemic transformation. We need a wellbeing economy - built for equality, justice, and sustainability."

Single parent, Dundee

Satwat Rehman, OPFS Chief Executive

Manifesto at a glance

OPFS consultations with single parents, experts by experience, found that they want a Scottish Parliament that:

1. Ensures that all families in Scotland have adequate incomes by:

- Increasing the Scottish Child Payment to a minimum of £55 by the end of the next Parliament, with targeted further increases for priority families – recognising that risks and depths of poverty are different for different groups[1].
- Targeting additional support through the Scottish Child Payment to families affected by the Young Parent Penalty[2].
- Increasing funding for income-maximisation services, with targeted investment in services which are best able to reach priority families.
- Ensuring separated parents can easily find their way into and through the Child Maintenance System, through provision of expert advice and support as part of income maximisation and financial inclusion services.
- Introducing funding requirements for financial inclusion services to provide guidance in relation to child maintenance eligibility, where relevant for families[3].
- Providing face-to-face support for parents using the Child Maintenance System whose separation is complex as part of holistic family support.
- Responding to the public debt crisis by reforming public debt recovery processes to prevent public debt trapping children and families in poverty, including targeted action to help and support single parent families[4].

2. Gives all children the resources they need to thrive at school by:

- Extending free school meals to all primary school pupils and committing to introducing universal free school meals for all pupils in secondary schools.
- Increasing the School Clothing Grant to cover the real cost of school clothing, widening access to all families on Universal Credit. This should include annual uplifts in line with inflation, and further work to ensure that eligible families are auto enrolled.
- Ending school meal debt in Scotland, recognising that no child should have to learn on an empty stomach.

[1] 'Meeting the Moment', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025
[2] Young Parent Penalty Web Page, OPFS
[3] 'Child Maintenance and its Impact on Child Poverty and Financial Security for Single Parent Families', IPPR Scotland, OPFS and Fife Gingerbread, 2024
[4] 'Disabled Households and Lone Parent Families and the Impact of Public Debt and Arrears', Aberlour, Trussell Trust, University of Glasgow, and OPFS, 2025

3. Empower families through opportunities to learn and access employment by:

- Supporting single parents into training, education and sustainable, family friendly employment, which pays the Real Living Wage at a minimum, through specialist employability support and actions to reduce inequalities in the labour market. This should include support to pursue career progression through provision of in-work training and mentorship opportunities.

4. Shows that Scotland is a country that cares by:

- Accelerating progress towards expanding universal childcare to one and two-year-olds and actions to create a system of funded school age childcare, whilst committing to a more radical childcare ambition including the choice of up to 50 hours of ELC[5].
- Introducing a new National Outcome on valuing and investing in care, and all those who provide it, as has already been agreed.

5. Supports families impacted by disability by:

- Introducing targeted social security interventions for families with disabled children, in line with the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan – recognising that they are likely to experience higher living costs associated with caring needs and receive lower levels of social security support through the UK social security than other family types.

6. Keeps the Promise made to Scotland's children and families by:

- Increasing support for families through statutory agencies, such as social work. Families must be helped to address key concerns and given support to increase the chance of successful reunification. This should include access to independent advocacy.
- Working with COSLA to review how, as part of the Promise, parents whose children are looked after away from home are protected from homelessness - or being forced to move to inappropriate accommodation that prevents family reunification.
- Investing in financial inclusion services so they are integrated into whole family support. A family finance health-check should be introduced for all families who have a child removed from the family home, or who have a child returning home after being looked after.
- Introducing flexibility to devolved benefits to provide for families in exceptional circumstances, so that benefits continue after a child is removed. This would require discussion with officials from Social Security Scotland, who have the expertise on whether this would require a change to existing regulations or legislation.

[5] 'A Childcare System for All', OPFS and Close the Gap, 2023

7. Supports Single Parents to Access Further and Higher Education by:

- Publishing clear information about what financial support is available to single parent students, and how this interacts with paid work and the benefits system.
- Reviewing the adequacy of the tailored financial support for single parents entering higher education.
- Integrating the voices of single parent students into policy development so that higher education is 'single parent proofed.

8. Takes a more progressive approach to taxation by:

- Using the Scottish Parliament's devolved tax powers to pursue more radical tax reform, including overhauling Council Tax and exploring new ways to tax wealth. This could raise substantial additional money, ensuring those with the highest incomes pay more while protecting those on the lowest.

9. Protects our planet for future generations by:

- Linking the Just Transition into employability initiatives, so that work to achieve net zero and work to reduce poverty supports each other. Without this interconnectedness there is a risk of reproducing and deepening inequalities.
- Recognising that a Just Transition must include investment in job creation within more carbon neutral sectors such as the care and childcare sectors.
- Investing in public transport as a viable alternative to car use, and as a lever to break down some of the inequalities and barriers facing single parents who already use public transport as their primary means of travel.
- Prioritising households experiencing fuel poverty, such as single parent families, in initiatives to improve energy efficiency and in available support such as grants. Otherwise, such families will be left behind in the transition to net zero.

Breaking down barriers

At OPFS we recognise that single parent families often face additional barriers to those of families with couple parents, which can contribute to higher rates of child poverty among this family type. Some of these include:

- **Gender inequality**: 92% of single parents are female[6].
- **Labour market inequality**: Single parents in work are consistently the family type most likely to face in-work poverty and are more likely to be working in a low-wage sector and on lower hours.
- **Lack of flexible, affordable early years and school age childcare**: For single parents, access to affordable, flexible, quality childcare is vital as means of enabling them to enter paid work and potentially lift their families out of poverty.
- **Disability**: On average, disabled households need an additional £975 a month to have the same standard of living as non-disabled households. Their extra costs are equivalent to 63% of household income[7].
- **Multiple inequalities**: Single parents are more likely than couple parents to be from black (9%) or mixed ethnic groups (3%), are more than twice as likely to be disabled (33%), and are more likely to have a disabled child (35%).

The next Scottish Government can support single parent families by taking steps to break down some of these barriers – levelling the playing field so that all families can thrive equally. In recent years, measures such as the Scottish Child Payment, Best Start Grants and Benefit Cap mitigation, have moved the dial on child poverty in the right direction – but further and faster action is urgently needed to meet statutory child poverty targets by 2030. In recent years, measures such as the Scottish Child Payment, Best Start Grants and Benefit Cap mitigation, have moved the dial on child poverty in the right direction – but further and faster action is urgently needed to meet statutory child poverty targets by 2030.

Priorities for the next Scottish Government

Ensure that all families in Scotland have adequate incomes

Every child should be able to grow up in a Scotland where their rights to development, health, social security, and education (UNCRC Articles 6, 24, 26, 28 and 29) are respected, protected and fulfilled. However, at present, too many children in Scotland are growing up without the resources that they need to realise these rights - as a direct result of their experiences of poverty.

While recent policy initiatives such as the Scottish Child Payment, benefit cap mitigation, and upcoming mitigation of the two-child limit have shown positive impact, with 23% of children in Scotland still living in poverty in 2023/24, further and faster action is needed to meet

[6] 'Child Poverty in Scotland: Priority Groups – Lone-Parent Families', Public Health Scotland, August 2020
[7] 'Disability Price Tag', Scope, 2023

statutory child poverty targets of 10% by 2030. Furthermore, this number rises to 36% for children in single parent families – highlighting a need for targeted intervention for this priority family.

We are therefore calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Increase the Scottish Child Payment to a minimum of £55 over the life of the next Parliament, with targeted further increases for priority families – recognising that risks and depths of poverty are different for different groups[8].
- Target additional support through the Scottish Child Payment to families affected by the Young Parent Penalty.
- Increase funding for income-maximisation services, with targeted investment in services which are best able to reach priority families.
- Ensure separated parents can easily find their way into and through the Child Maintenance System, through provision of expert advice and support as part of income maximisation and financial inclusion services.
- Introduce funding requirements for financial inclusion services to provide guidance in relation to child maintenance eligibility, where relevant for families[9].
- Provide face-to-face support for parents using the Child Maintenance System whose separation is complex as part of holistic family support.
- Respond to the public debt crisis by reforming public debt recovery processes to prevent public debt trapping children and families in poverty, including targeted action to help and support single parent families.

Give all children the resources they need to thrive at school

While primary and secondary education is free to access in Scotland, OPFS knows all too well that there are many hidden costs to the school day.

Costs for item such as school supplies, school uniform, school meals, and transport can add up quickly – making it harder for families on low incomes to provide everything that their child needs to thrive in education. This creates an inequality in the quality of learning for children, threatening their rights to learn and develop their personality, talents and abilities to the full (UNCRC Articles 28 and 29).

We are therefore calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Extend free school meals to all primary school pupils and commit to introducing universal free school meals for all pupils in secondary schools.

- Increase the School Clothing Grant to cover the real cost of school clothing, widening access to all families on Universal Credit. This should include annual uplifts in line with inflation, and further work to ensure that eligible families are auto enrolled.

- End school meal debt in Scotland, recognising that no child should have to learn on an empty stomach.

[8] 'Meeting the Moment', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025
[9] 'Child Maintenance and its Impact on Child Poverty and Financial Security for Single Parent Families', IPPR Scotland, OPFS and Fife Gingerbread, 2024

Empower families through opportunities to learn and access employment

66% of single parents are in some form of employment, and yet they are consistently more likely to be in low-paid work than other parents. Navigating a balance between caring responsibilities and employment can be challenging, and efforts to support single parents into higher-paid, sustainable employment must go further to offer flexible solutions and must be more widely available.

We are therefore calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Support single parents into training, education and sustainable, family friendly employment, which pays the Real Living Wage at a minimum, through specialist employability support and actions to reduce inequalities in the labour market. This should include support to pursue career progression through provision of in-work training and mentorship opportunities.

Show that Scotland is a country that cares

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:

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

In addition to childcare, we recognise that many single parents will also undertake other caring roles, including within the care sector. The under-valuation of social care workers reflects the under-valuation of all care in Scotland, whether paid or unpaid, with too many single parents

in low paid caring roles living in poverty. A high proportion of single parents care for a disabled child - for too long, people who care for others, whether paid or unpaid, have been undervalued and under-rewarded.

As a result, caring can result in significant personal and economic costs for individuals and their families, with carers more likely to live in poverty.

Therefore, we are calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Introduce a new National Outcome on valuing and investing in care and all those who provide it, as has already been agreed.

Support families impacted by disability

Single parents, the majority of whom are mothers, are on call 24/7 for their children, often with no respite. The pressure is often compounded when one or more of their children is disabled. A low income and a lack of wider family support can make these situations extremely challenging. The impact can be significant, for example on the parents' health and wellbeing, and can limit opportunities for them to take up paid employment.

The barriers to accessing high quality childcare are worse for children with disabilities and other additional support needs. Parents and carers of children with disabilities pay higher than average costs, and three quarters have reduced their hours or left their jobs because of difficulties accessing appropriate childcare.

There is a need for greater recognition of the structural limitations parents caring for a disabled child or children face, the additional drivers of poverty they may encounter, and the subsequent policies needed to address these concerns.

As a result, we are calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Introduce targeted social security interventions for families with disabled children, in line with the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan – recognising that they are likely to experience higher living costs associated with caring needs and receive lower levels of social security support through the UK social security system than other family types.

Keep the Promise made to Scotland's children and families

Family poverty increases the risk of a child entering the care system. However, poverty additionally has an extremely detrimental impact on families when a child enters the care system - and if they return from care. This is exacerbated by gaps in policy responses and service delivery to support families during transition periods[10].

For families reliant on social security benefits, family poverty is very likely to be precipitated or exacerbated when a child is taken into care. At stressful transition points, the family must frequently ride out periods of severe financial hardship due to loss of income - impacting parents' mental health and wellbeing and sometimes causing homelessness. This, in turn,

[10] 'Poverty-Proofing for Families in or on the Edges of Care', OPFS, August 2023

reduces parents' capacity to offer a safe, nurturing home, leading to the child not being able to return from care, or prolonging their stay in care.

Given that families experiencing poverty are more likely than others to encounter engagement with the care system in the first place, the effects of further financial hardship are even more serious.

We are therefore calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Increase support for families through statutory agencies, such as social work. Families must be helped to address key concerns and given support to increase the chance of successful reunification. This should include access to independent advocacy.
- Work with COSLA to review how, as part of the Promise, parents whose children are looked after away from home are protected from homelessness - or being forced to move to inappropriate accommodation that prevents family reunification.
- Invest in financial inclusion services so they are integrated into whole family support. A family finance health-check should be introduced for all families who have a child removed from the family home, or who have a child returning home after being looked after.
- Introduce flexibility to devolved benefits to provide for families in exceptional circumstances, so that benefits continue after a child is removed. This would require discussion with officials from Social Security Scotland, who have the expertise on whether this would require a change to existing regulations or legislation.

Support single parents to access further and higher education

Higher education is a vital pathway for single parents seeking economic stability and career advancement. However, numerous barriers - financial, institutional, and personal - limit their ability to enrol, persist, and complete their studies.

In the 2025 OPFS report 'Single Parents and Higher Education: Barriers to Access and Recommendations for Change'[11], several barriers faced by single parents entering higher education were identified. These notably included challenges broadly relating to accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare, finances, mental health, and lack of overall high-quality support to enter and continue studies.

We are therefore calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Publish clear information about what financial support is available to single parent students, and how this interacts with paid work and the benefits system.
- Review the adequacy of the tailored financial support for single parents entering higher education.
- Integrate the voices of single parent students into policy development so that higher education is 'single parent proofed.

[11] 'Single Parents and Higher Education: Barriers to Access and Recommendations for Change', OPFS, 2025

Take a more progressive approach to taxation

The next Scottish Government has the ability to use Holyrood's tax powers to increase the resources available to help families on low incomes, including single parent families. These changes to taxation could be used to invest in crucial provisions such as social security, whole family support, and education.

They could also be used to deliver more sustainable funding contracts for the third sector – who play a vital role in supporting children and families across Scotland.

As such, and as members of Tax Justice Scotland, we are calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Using the Scottish Parliament's devolved tax powers to pursue more radical tax reform, including overhauling Council Tax and exploring new ways to tax wealth. This could raise substantial additional money, ensuring those with the highest incomes pay more while protecting those on the lowest.

Protect our planet for future generations

One Parent Families Scotland is actively involved in the Climate Policy Engagement Network, as well as the Just Transition Commission. In 2024 we published a report following consultation with, and support of, single parents around topics related to the transition to net zero, such as transport, employment, opportunities for accessing training and gaining qualifications, housing, and energy costs[12].

As a result of the findings of this consultation, we are calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Link the Just Transition into employability initiatives, so that work to achieve net zero and work to reduce poverty supports each other. Without this interconnectedness there is a risk of reproducing and deepening inequalities.
- Recognise that a Just Transition must include investment in job creation within more carbon neutral sectors such as the care and childcare sectors.
- Investing in public transport as a viable alternative to car use, and as a lever to break down some of the inequalities and barriers facing single parents who already use public transport as their primary means of travel.
- Prioritise households experiencing fuel poverty, such as single parent families, in initiatives to improve energy efficiency and in available support such as grants. Otherwise, such families will be left behind in the transition to net zero.

[12] 'Climate Change and a Just Transition', OPFS, March 2024

References

'Meeting the Moment', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025

Young Parent Poverty Web Page, OPFS

'Child Maintenance and its Impact on Child Poverty and Financial Security for Single Parent Families', IPPR Scotland, OPFS and Fife Gingerbread, 2024

'Disabled Households and Lone Parent Families and the Impact of Public Debt and Arrears', Aberlour, Trussell Trust, University of Glasgow, and OPFS, 2025

'A Childcare System for All', OPFS and Close the Gap, 2023

'Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2021-24', Scottish Government, April 2025

'Child Poverty in Scotland: Priority Groups – Lone-Parent Families', Public Health Scotland, August 2020

'Disability Price Tag', Scope, 2023

'Poverty-Proofing for Families in or on the Edges of Care', OPFS, August 2023

'Single Parents and Higher Education: Barriers to Access and Recommendations for Change', OPFS, 2025

'Climate Change and a Just Transition', OPFS, March 2024

About One Parent Families Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) is the national organization 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, recognizing most single parents are women and that many BAME, disabled and young single parents face multiple structural barriers affecting access to services and opportunities.

For more information, please contact our Policy and Influencing Lead, Leah Duncan-Karrim at leah.duncan-karrim@opfs.org.uk

One Parent Families Scotland
changing lives, challenging poverty

One Parent Families Scotland,
2 YorkPlace, Edinburgh EH1 3EP

Tel: **0131 556 3899**

www.opfs.org.uk