



# Changing childhoods and protecting parents - our priorities for Scotland's new government

Changing Realities participants in Scotland  
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*Looking ahead to the new parliamentary term, there is an opportunity to make things better for families living on a low income. The next Scottish Government must listen to our voices and act so we can give our children the childhood they deserve.*

## **Who we are**

*Changing Realities* works in partnership with more than 200 parents and carers from across the UK to document the realities of life on a low income, and to push for change. This includes over 50 parents and carers living in Scotland, who worked together to agree the principles that we share throughout this briefing. *Changing Realities* uses online diaries, video questions, and regular discussion groups and also regularly meets with parliamentarians, including at the highest level of government.

# Protection, security and dignity for all families

Too many families in Scotland are struggling. The effects of poverty on children are damaging and last a long time. For children, this means things like going without the new clothes they need, feeling isolated, bored, and left behind compared to their friends.

Some parents face even greater barriers, such as families who are excluded from support like the Scottish child payment because of immigration status. Poverty affects us all the same, and all our children deserve the same chance to grow up safe, secure and happy.

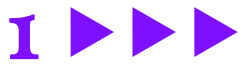
Parents and politicians can all agree that children are the future of Scotland, and the Scottish Government should take pride in investing in them.

There have been some significant and progressive changes in recent years to help parents on a low income, like the Scottish child payment and more free school meals. But Scotland is still very unequal.

Changing Realities want a future where the Scottish Government does all within its power to support all families, no matter what their circumstances, to have protection, security and dignity.

To build this future, the next Scottish Government must:

- ▶▶▶ **1. Help parents with the costs of a secure and joyful childhood**
- ▶▶▶ **2. Open up opportunities for parents to work, study and achieve our goals**
- ▶▶▶ **3. Change the narrative and challenge stigma**



# Help parents with the costs of a secure and joyful childhood

Raising children should be joyful, not a constant financial worry. But bills are rising, food costs more and school expenses add pressure too. Financial support does not buy you as much as it used to. Our children feel the impact of this, including on their mental wellbeing. All children deserve a secure and joyful childhood, no matter what their background.

***The next Scottish Government must:***

## **Increase the Scottish child payment**

This payment currently helps to cover family costs like bills or food, especially during the school holidays.<sup>1</sup> Increasing the payment would go further to support parents and children with what they need.

## **Extend Scottish child payment to 16 to 19-year olds in full-time, non-advanced education or approved training**

Many parents still have financial responsibility for their children aged 16 and over. When Scottish child payment stops at 16 it means families have less money but still face the same costs and number of children in the house.<sup>2</sup>

## Provide more funding for advice for families

Families should not have to fight for the support they need. It's often hard to know what you are entitled to and get signposted to the right place. More funding for advice services will help with this.

## Introduce free school meals for all

Receiving a meal at school is vital for learning and all children should have free school meals. At the moment, universal free school meals for P1 to P5 mean that no children in this age range miss out - including families with No Recourse to Public Funds. It is a step in the right direction that P6 and P7 pupils (and S1-3 pupils in some areas as part of a pilot) who get Scottish child payment are now also eligible for free school meals. But Changing Realities want to see the government go further to make this universal for all school children in Scotland. This would mean no children are missing out, and families don't face worries about covering the costs when their children get older.



## Provide support in the school holidays

The long holidays while schools are closed can be very challenging on a low income. Families need more support to help cover the costs of essentials such as food during the school holidays, as well as activities such as sports or trips away. All children should have the opportunity to go somewhere, see someone and take part in activities - including older children who are often left out. It can be especially hard to find affordable activities for children with additional support needs. It is vital that activities are genuinely inclusive.

## Fund genuinely affordable and accessible housing

Housing is one of the main costs squeezing family budgets, and many families are affected by insecure and temporary housing situations. Changing Realities participants - as well as families all across Scotland - need more access to genuinely affordable and accessible housing for parents, including homes suitable for larger families.

This includes the building of new homes and acquiring homes for social housing. The Scottish



Government must reduce the number of children in temporary accommodation – with many families spending long periods of time in unsafe and unsuitable housing

## **Help to manage energy costs**

Parents should not be up at night worrying about high energy costs, or how they can keep the heating on during the cold and dark winter months. The Scottish Government should do all within its powers to ensure families can access the advice and financial support they need to manage energy costs and prevent crisis. This includes additional funding for advice services and additional financial support so families can access the help they need.

## **Bring in more appropriate childcare and funding for learning support for children with additional support needs (ASN)**

Finding the right support for children with ASN is a challenge for parents living on a low income or living in an area that does not have sufficient support available. It can be hard for parents to find accessible and affordable childcare appropriate for children with ASN, and this has knock-on effects on parents' ability to work. Similarly, more training is needed in schools and within communities to spot the signs early and provide early help. Children with additional needs should not be labelled as disruptive but provided with understanding and support, regardless of family income.



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# Open up opportunities for low-income parents to work, study and achieve our goals

Childcare costs, inflexible work and a lack of support often stand in the way of low-income parents' ability to work and study. While not all aspects of these policy areas are devolved, where possible the Scottish Government needs to remove barriers for families to access financial stability through good quality employment.

***The next Scottish Government must:***

## **Go further to provide more affordable and accessible childcare**

Childcare is expensive, especially when parents need to combine different types of childcare to get before- and after-school wraparound support. Paying for after-school clubs and breakfast clubs can put pressure on family budgets and it can be hard to find affordable childcare that fits with working hours. While the 1,140 funded hours for 3- and 4-year-olds and eligible 2-year-olds are a good thing, we need more affordable childcare, including wraparound childcare for school-aged children, that aligns with parents' working patterns and school holidays.

## **Provide employment support to get parents into good work and require employers to provide flexible working for parents**

Employers need to approach parents and carers with more flexibility and understanding. There should be more flexible working opportunities that actually fit around childcare, including working from home options. The Scottish Government should do everything in its power to create incentives for employers to provide secure jobs with flexible working for parents. There also needs to be more funding for tailored support to help parents into good quality employment and help them to progress towards their goals.

## **Provide support for student parents**

While student parents are not excluded from receiving Universal Credit, student loans and bursaries are counted as a source of income. For parents in work, Universal Credit is reduced by a taper (55p for

every £1) and only after they have earned a certain amount (£411 with housing costs or £684 without). For student parents, this is reduced pound for pound after the first £110. This means that those of us who are studying can lose entitlement to Universal Credit and consequently Scottish child payment at a lower income level than parents in work. This makes it really difficult for student parents to achieve their goals and progress in work in the long term. While Universal Credit is a reserved benefit, the Scottish Government should look at how they can provide more support to parents who are studying.

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## Change the narrative and challenge stigma

Lots of us feel affected by the negative rhetoric about families living on a low income and receiving benefits, particularly the stigma attached to receiving support for a disability (including mental-health related disabilities). Social Security Scotland's principles of dignity and respect are making a positive, material difference to those who interact with the system, but there continues to be stigma associated with receiving the support that people need and are entitled to. Politicians should stand with families who need support, not single us out.

Families seeking asylum and refugee families also face stigma and racism, while people seeking asylum receive less support for their children. When you look at the needs of a human being, our needs are all the same. No families should be excluded because of their circumstances.

***The next Scottish  
Government must:***



## **Commit to a better conversation around social security**

We want all of Scotland's new parliament to commit to the principles of Social Security Scotland: that social security is a human right, and should be delivered with dignity, fairness and respect. The next Scottish Government should commit specifically to protecting disabled people's dignity and rights to social security as social security is vital to help disabled people to get by.

## **Provide more support for families seeking asylum**

It is not right that families who are seeking asylum receive much less support and children growing up in Scotland are not eligible for the Scottish child payment. Families also face a lot of stigma, but people seeking asylum in Scotland have a lot to offer. We want to work, pay tax and contribute to the community but do not have the right to work because of our status.

Support should be universally provided to reflect the needs of everyone. The next Government needs to do more to support all families, such as seeking an equivalent alternative to the Scottish child payment. Moreover, free bus travel for asylum seekers has helped but this needs to be extended.

## **Listen to lived experience and work with us to make change.**

Don't speak about us, work with us. We need the next Scottish Government to change the narrative with us. Lived experience can be a blueprint for change. We want politicians to be honest about what needs changing and to work towards providing protection, security and dignity for all. That is our narrative for a better future.

We want the next Scottish Government to listen to us and ensure that all families in Scotland are protected and live in security and dignity. All children deserve a secure and joyful childhood - with these changes the new Scottish Government has the power to make this a reality and change childhoods for good.

**Changing Realities** is a partnership between parents and carers, the **University of Glasgow**, **Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG)**, and the **London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine**. Thank you to **The Robertson Trust** who have funded Changing Realities' work in Scotland.

**[changingrealities.org](http://changingrealities.org)**

## Footnotes

1 -- Find out more about the difference Scottish child payment is making for families in Changing Realities' joint briefing with the Family Finances project: 'Investing in all our futures: improving the good the Scottish Child Payment can do', 2026: <https://familyfinances.study/assets/pdf/Scottish%20Child%20Payment%20Briefing%20January%202026.pdf>

2 -- According to CPAG estimates, this would provide support for 43,000 young people at a cost of £43 million (with a 0.3 percentage point reduction in child poverty). CPAG's calculations from Households Below Average Income 2021/22 to 2023/24 and UKMOD tax-benefit microsimulation software. See: <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2026-01/Strengthening%20Scottish%20Social%20Security%20report%20Jan%202026.pdf>



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