

Tackling Child Poverty: Scottish Green Priorities

One in four children in Scotland now lives in poverty – damaging their health, development and education. The level of child poverty in Scotland is predicted to rise: The Institute for Fiscal studies forecasts that almost 30% of children in Scotland will be living in poverty by 2019-21.¹ We need to take urgent action to prevent this. The Child Poverty Act set robust targets to reduce child poverty, and to meet these we have to lift up people's incomes, providing significant investment in our welfare system and local services.

These are some of the actions the Scottish Greens have prioritised in the fight against child poverty: they should be part of a strong **Child Poverty Delivery Plan** which commits substantial resources to boosting families' finances.

1. Healthier, Wealthier Children:

Across NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, trusted NHS staff like midwives and health visitors refer parents in financial difficulty directly to local money and welfare rights advisors: making sure they receive benefits and financial help they're entitled to, and gaining almost £16m for families since 2010.² Similar programmes are working successfully in parts of NHS Lothian, NHS Lanarkshire, NHS Highland and other areas. Rolling this approach to income maximisation out across Scotland will help reach every pregnant woman and new family in financial need. The Scottish Government has committed to the roll-out. Now the Child Poverty Delivery Plan should allocate specific resources to support this programme.

2. Top-up Child Benefit:

Increasing Child Benefit by just £5 would lift 30,000 children out of poverty, and support many thousands more families who struggle on a low income but are not recognised as living in poverty.³ Benefit reforms since 2011 have eroded the value of child Benefit, while families have had to cope with rising costs. Child Poverty Action Group predict that by 2020, Child Benefit will worth 28% less than in 2010.⁴ The near-universal reach of Child Benefit means it is a trusted source of income that many families rely on, and topping up this benefit is the best way of making sure the greatest number of families in poverty get additional cash in their pockets.

¹ Andrew Hood and Tom Waters, 'Living Standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2017-18 to 2021-22' The Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (November 2017). Available at: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/10029> See Appendix, Figure 2.8

² Jackie Erdman and Lynn Naven, 'Learning from the Healthier, Wealthier Children Project'. Presentation on Preventing and Mitigating Child Poverty, What Works Scotland and the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (August 2017). Available at <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/events/preventing-and-mitigating-child-poverty/>

³ Antonia Keung and Jonathan Bradshaw, (University of York Social Policy Unit) 'Analysis of the Impact of Increases to Child Benefit and Child Tax Credits on Child Poverty Rates in the UK and Scotland' (October 2017). Available at: <http://jonathanbradshaw.blogspot.co.uk/2017/10/analysis-of-impact-of-increases-to.html>

⁴ Child Poverty Action Group 'Welfare Reform and Work Group' (July 2015), p.17. Available at <http://www.cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/CPAGBriefingWelfareReformandWorkBillCommons2ndReading2020-07-15.pdf>

3. Uprate Benefits in line with Inflation:

Like Child Benefit, the value of many essential sources of income has been eroded by welfare reform and the effects of inflation. The Social Security Committee heard evidence that by 2020, £300 million will be cut from 700,000 households in Scotland because the UK Government has set aside the requirement on it to uprate benefits.⁵ The Scottish Greens lodged amendments to the Social Security Bill which would have ensured that the Scottish Government had to take measures to uprate all forms of assistance, based on relevant increases in prices.⁶ Since it was introduced the Sure Start Maternity Grant has only been uprated once, so the value of payments to new parents in need has dropped every year, while the cost of bringing up a baby has risen. Making sure the new Best Start Grant is uprated fairly is vital.

4. Scrap the Benefit Cap:

Scottish Green research has shown that the Benefit Cap has removed thousands of pounds a year from 11,000 children in 2,700 families who are in the most need.⁷ Introduced in 2013, the Benefit Cap arbitrarily limits the benefits struggling families can receive, pushing their income below the minimum amount the UK social security system believes people need to live on. Mitigating the effects of this unjust and damaging policy should be a priority for the Scottish Government.

5. End the 'Two Child' limit on Tax Credits and Universal Credit:

The unfair decision to limit tax credits and the child element of universal credit payments to the first two children in a family, undermines our social security system and places families in financial jeopardy. This policy is an attack on women's rights: compounded by the vile rape clause. No family in Scotland should suffer because of this unfair decision.

6. Support Carers:

There are at least 29,000 young carers in Scotland, and 44,000 carers under the age of 18. We are glad the Scottish Government has listened and recognised the need to introduce a young carers grant and help young carers with travel costs. Nobody should experience poverty because of the care someone in their household gives, or the care someone needs, but many children do. The Scottish Greens want to see Carers Allowance increased by at least 50% in value, with a premium for people who care for more than one person, and much more recognition of the need for flexibility when considering the hours of caring, work or study someone is undertaking.

7. Poverty Proof the School Day:

Children growing up in poverty can face real financial barriers that stop them participating in school as they would like to. From school lunches to school trips, uniforms and access to equipment, essentials and extras all add up. Children can feel vulnerable and excluded because of their families finances. We support efforts to link school staff and parents with income maximisation and welfare rights advisors, and the planned expansion of free early years education offers an opportunity to provide

⁵ SP OR SS (1 March 2018). Available at: <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.asp>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dan Heap and Alison Johnstone, 'The Impact of the Extended UK Benefit Cap in Scotland' (August 2017), p5. Available at: <https://greens.scot/sites/default/files/BenefitCapFinalAug.pdf>

this support at the earliest possible stage. We would welcome the expansion of free school meals, beyond the first three years of primary school, as well as efforts to increase the uptake of school meals. The Glasgow Centre for Population Health estimated that the basic cost of buying a school uniform is almost £130.⁸ Yet school clothing grants can range from just £20, with an average payment of £50.⁹ There must be nationwide agreement on the minimum value of school clothing grants.

8. Tackle High Cost Credit:

People on low incomes often pay the most for necessary goods and services. We must tackle the poverty premium by improving access to sustainable, affordable credit alternatives. Increasing financial inclusion through supporting Community Finance Development Initiatives and other projects ensures that those on tight budgets aren't forced to turn to rent-to-own stores and doorstep loans, which can lead to problem debt and more financial strain for families.

9. Pay benefits automatically:

Where possible, people who are entitled to benefits should receive them without having to apply repeatedly, or through multiple systems. The complexity of the current UK benefits system can discourage people from applying for financial help, with huge sums of benefits going unclaimed. Scotland's new social security system should make paying benefits as seamless and possible. Uptake for some forms of assistance from local authorities can also be much lower than levels of need. The Social Security has heard evidence about ongoing work in Glasgow, West Lothian, and North Lanarkshire to make sure families get free school meals, school clothing grants, EMA payments, help with council tax, housing benefit, and many other costs as easily as possible.¹⁰

10. Explore options for introducing a Universal Basic Income:

Ultimately, we must ensure our Social Security system really does provide people with financial security. A Universal Basic Income would provide stability to parents who work part time, may feel required to take some breaks from employment to fulfil caring responsibilities and who wish to study or retrain to improve their circumstances. The Scottish Government should follow pilot projects in Glasgow and Fife closely, and continue to lead research and modelling in the impact of a universal basic income.

⁸ Glasgow Centre for Population Health, 'Learning from the Cost of the School Day Project' (October 2016) p.8. Available at: http://www.gcph.co.uk/assets/0000/6096/Briefing_paper_BP49_cost_of_school_day_WEB.pdf

⁹ Glasgow Centre for Population Health, p.10.

¹⁰ OP SS (22 March 2018). Available at: <http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.asp>