

Save the Children Briefing for the Social Justice & Social Security Committee on the Scottish Government's *Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026*

1. Introduction

- 1.1. We are pleased that the Committee is prioritising scrutiny of the Scottish Government's new tackling child poverty delivery plan, *Best Start, Brighter Futures* (the Plan), and welcome the opportunity to share our views. We hope the Committee will maintain a rigorous approach to monitoring delivery of the actions in the Plan and its impact over the next four years. The Plan marks an important milestone in tackling child poverty in Scotland. It needs to set out actions to meet the interim target to reduce relative child poverty to below 18% by 2023/24 and ensure we are well on the way to meet the 2030 targets.
- 1.2. Our analysis of the Plan is based on decades of experience of working alongside children and families with experience of poverty and low income. It is also based on reflecting on the work we did with parents at the end of 2021 to set out their views on what more needs to be done to address child poverty in Scotland. The key messages were shared with Scottish Government to help inform the development of the Plan and are set out in our report '[It would be nice to just feel secure – Parents priorities for the next Scottish Government child poverty delivery plan 2022 - 2026](#)'. We are currently working with parents, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and the Fraser of Allander Institute to fully digest and assess the detail of the plan and will publish our findings in June. Our preliminary reflections are set out below.

2. The challenge

- 2.1. As we assess the Plan, we must keep in mind the sobering scale of the challenge we face. One in four children in Scotland are currently living in poverty. For some family types the risk of poverty is even greater – with over a third of children in single parent families, families with babies under one and ethnic minority families experiencing poverty and half of children in families with young mums. In addition, destitution is rising amongst low-income households. It is not a static group of children living in poverty year on year. Recent research has found that *more than* half (55%) of children in Scotland have experienced poverty in the last twelve years.¹ Some children (1 in 10) experience poverty persistently while others do for short periods, cycling in and out of poverty. Experiencing poverty for any period is difficult and has an impact on children and family wellbeing and outcomes. This suggests policies and support need to meet the needs of a wide group of families.

¹ Morag Treanor's analysis in Poverty and Inequality Commission (2022) *Advice on the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026*

- 2.2. But this is about more than numbers. It's about striving for fairer childhoods, free from poverty, where children and families can thrive. The longer it takes to make progress the more children and families will face the injustice and consequences of poverty. Every family needs an adequate and reliable income to live with dignity. The UNCRC is clear that every child has the right to a decent standard of living and to benefit from social security. It also states that parents and carers have a right to material assistance and support programmes to ensure their basic needs are met. A rights-based approach to tackling poverty is inclusive of every child and family and calls for the maximum extent of resources to be used.
- 2.3. The harsh reality is that poverty left hundreds of thousands of families vulnerable to the economic impact of Covid and exposed the fragility of managing on a low income. Family budgets are being squeezed now more than ever, compounded by the cost of living crisis, crushing rises in energy prices, inflation reaching a 30 year high, and a decade of falling living standards. Beyond this Plan additional support needs to be directed at the poorest households immediately (by Scottish and UK Governments). The Scottish Government must look at what more it can do now to support low-income families with immediate financial pressures and to support families through the cost of living crisis.

3. Meeting the interim child poverty targets

- 3.1. Before the Plan was published several reports and organisations (including Save the Children) highlighted concerns that Scotland was not on track to meet the interim or final child poverty targets - unless significant additional investment and actions at greater pace and scale were taken.² There has been no significant progress in reducing the overall numbers of children in poverty in the last four years, in fact child poverty was rising before the pandemic.³ The Plan recognises more can and must be done. It was widely recognised that social security benefits would have to play a significant role in meeting the imminent interim target – reducing child poverty from around 24% to below 18% by 2023/24.
- 3.2. We therefore welcome the government's commitment to putting in place a range of significant and credible actions that are projected to meet the interim targets and lift tens of thousands of children out poverty. We particularly welcome the planned increase in the Scottish Child Payment (SCP) to £25 per week per child by the end of this year, and investment in mitigating the benefit cap. While we cannot be certain the targets will be met, we think these new and concrete social security commitments are a strong step forward. Ensuring these commitments are delivered will be key. Any delay in implementation to the planned increase to the SCP will put meeting the interim targets at risk. Missing

² Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2021), Fraser of Allander Institute (2021), Poverty & Inequality Commission (2021)

³ Scottish Government (2022) *Additional Child Poverty Analysis* – three-year average data <https://www.gov.scot/publications/additional-child-poverty-analysis-2022/>

the target by even 1% means tens of thousands of children continuing to experience poverty.

4. Looking ahead to 2030

4.1. Analysis has shown that transformational change, using all levers available on social security and work and earnings will be needed to meet the final targets.⁴ We cannot be certain at this point whether the actions in the Plan will mean we are on track to meet the 2030 targets. It is hoped that the cumulative impact of the actions will deliver sustainable progress and set us on course for the transformational change that is needed. We will be doing further work with our partners to assess this in the coming months.

4.2. We know more needs to be done in the next eight years to make sure every household in Scotland has a decent standard of living. Overall the Plan looks set to make much needed progress in the right direction in key areas. The ambitions set out as Scotland's Offer to Families are welcome and appear to broadly cover the right areas of policy and demonstrate a positive direction of travel. The continued focus on tackling the key drivers of poverty – income from social security, reducing living costs and income from employment – is also positive. Research with parents suggests these are the right areas to focus increased action and activity on and will have the biggest impact on ensuring every family has an adequate income.⁵ We also welcome recognition that alongside a relentless focus on incomes there is a need to focus on preventing poverty in the long term and supporting children's wellbeing and outcomes.

4.3. The test of whether we will succeed will be in the delivery of these ambitions. It is vital that policy ambition is quickly translated into specific activity and impact to provide much needed support to families. We must not let an 'implementation gap' to emerge against our policy goals. In key areas like childcare and creating family friendly jobs there remains a lack of specific detail on the actions that will be taken and the impact these are set to have. 'Operational art' will be needed to bring actions together to build momentum, drive progress against the causes of poverty and make a real difference in people's lives. Several commitments state that funds will be available 'up to' a certain amount. We recognise that funding cannot be confirmed until the spending review is completed. However, this leaves some uncertainty as to the total commitment being made in different policy areas. We urge the Committee to explore the detail of this as funding decisions are made.

⁴ Poverty and Inequality Commission (2021) Advice on the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-2026

⁵ Poverty Alliance (2022) Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2022-26: Voices from our Communities

5. Maximising support to families to live dignified lives and meet basic needs

5.1. The role of social security is fundamental to tackling child poverty in Scotland. The Scottish Government can play a significant and unique role in increasing family incomes through providing an adequate Scottish social security safety net. We know how fundamental this support is to families. Parents value cash first approaches to social security that not just help provide an adequate income but allow them to exercise choice and dignity in meeting needs. Action to put more money directly into families' pockets is therefore positive. We welcome the progress that has been made to date to create a package of family benefits that when fully implemented will provide significant additional financial support. There is evidence that this making a difference.⁶

5.2. We warmly welcome the additional measures set out in the plan to further boost social security and are pleased these follow the principles of a cash first approach. We feel these go some way to address the key issues parents wanted to see in the Plan. The actions broadly mirror what parents told us they'd like to see in the Plan. In particular we welcome:

- The commitment to increase the SCP to £25 per child by the end of 2022
- Increasing the value of Best Start Grants and other social security benefits in line with inflation
- Strengthening eligibility of Best Start Foods in line with the SCP and moving to a cash payment
- £10 million investment to mitigate the benefit cap for priority groups.

The Scottish Child Payment (SCP)

5.3. The SCP represents a major step in tackling child poverty and setting a path towards meeting the targets. Once fully rolled out an increase to £25 will substantially reduce the number of children living in poverty and set a positive course towards meeting the interim target. It will be important to monitor the adequacy of this payment over the next four years (alongside ensuring the value of other benefits is keeping pace with inflation). Even with these welcome increases many families will be left in poverty. In the longer-term we very much welcome the work government is doing to explore a minimum income guarantee.

5.4. The government's modelling suggests that progress in reducing child poverty will stall after 2023/24. Therefore, we believe the government needs to remain open to further increases in the payment during the timescale of the Plan. We are calling on government to commit to increase the SCP to £40 by the end of this Parliament to take us closer to the target of eradicating child poverty by 2030.

5.5. It may be possible to have greater impact still by focussing on specific priority groups. Better targeting could help to bring more children above the poverty line and lift more families out of deep poverty, protecting them from the risk of

⁶ Hirsch (2022) The cost of a child in Scotland. Child Poverty Action Group

destitution. Our recent report with The Trussell Trust and IPPR⁷ examined some options for this. As the payment increases it is important to consider how to manage the ‘cliff-edge’ that will be created if families stop receiving Universal Credit (or relevant legacy benefits). The Scottish Government should consider options for addressing this.

5.6. Parents generally welcome and are very positive about the payment – its reliability, certainty, and simplicity. But that’s not to say some parents haven’t experienced issues or there isn’t room for improvement. Our recent report found that the payment could better respond to individual circumstances by increasing in flexibility, especially with regards to frequency of the payments, and families could benefit from a simpler and more automated application process across the range of support available. Our work with parents shows that linking benefits works well for families. We welcome the commitment in the Plan to explore systems of automated payments including linking the SCP with the Best Start Grant. We also believe the payment could act as a ‘passport’ to wider support, ensuring the ‘no wrong door’ approach for families on a low income and help access advice on income maximisation and employability support.

5.7. It will be vital to also look at maximising take-up of the payment in coming years. We believe a public awareness campaign in 2022-23 – coinciding with the roll out to children aged under 16 – aimed at substantially increasing take up would be useful. This should be co-designed with prospective claimants and engage a wide range of support workers and front-line staff who might play a role in supporting eligible families to apply.⁸

Mitigating the benefit cap

5.8. We welcome the commitment to working with local government to mitigate the unfair benefit cap and the significant investment that has been announced. We know that some families in the priority groups are most affected by the benefit cap and therefore it is likely to have a significant impact on them. There is limited detail in the Plan on how this investment will be used. We believe it is important to ensure that the money is ringfenced to ensure priority is given to this policy aim.

Scottish Welfare Fund

5.9. One of the goals of the Plan should be to enable more families to access adequate and stable incomes and move away from reliance on crisis support (like crisis funds and food banks). While crisis support is needed to help parents through challenging circumstances, we are concerned that some forms of emergency support are increasingly being relied upon to supplement inadequate incomes. Our recent report looked at the role of the Scottish Welfare Fund in

⁷ Statham et al (2022) Tackling Child Poverty and Destitution. Save the Children and The Trussell Trust.

⁸ Statham et al (2022) Tackling Child Poverty and Destitution. Save the Children and The Trussell Trust.

supporting families facing financial emergency and crisis. The report included several immediate and longer-term recommendations for strengthening the Fund. We welcome the commitment in the Plan to ensuring the Fund is working effectively and providing the support needed. Given the current pressures on family budgets we would like to see the findings of the review expedited, and changes implemented as soon as possible.

- 5.10. Parents shared with us their experiences of applying for support from the Fund. Often these experiences were negative, with some parents resorting to debt - budgeting loans instead.⁹ Most families we spoke to have or had experience of debt. The impact of debt is significant, serious, and stifling for families. It often causes a spiral of financial difficulties. It causes stress and takes its toll on family wellbeing and parents' mental health. We would like to see more action to help parents manage and reduce debt.

Holistic family support

- 5.11. Many low-income parents start their parenting journey with money worries and the stresses that brings as well as limited knowledge of their entitlements. The distinction between devolved and non-devolved benefits and support is not always clear or relevant to parents. Information is not always provided in a way that is easily understood and parents rely on professionals to find out about and access them. Our work with parents shows that parents are best supported by relationship focussed, community based holistic family support.¹⁰
- 5.12. Parents and organisations supporting families have been clear about the vital role of holistic family support in tackling poverty. Parents have repeatedly told us that joined up practical, emotional, and financial support is the best way to support them. Practical and emotional support is as important to parents as financial support. The challenges faced by parents/ carers and the emotional distress of poverty is one of the main themes we see in our work alongside families. Financial security is key to family wellbeing. Our research with parents found that when personal and relationship based financial support is available this worked well and increased uptake of entitlements for those families.
- 5.13. We are therefore heartened to see recognition of the need to invest in and prioritise holistic family support in response to a clear message from parents and organisations supporting families that this type of support is valued and can impact on tackling child poverty and improving families' wellbeing. Save the Children is encouraged that the Plan recognises the role holistic family support can play in tackling child poverty and the commitment *to strive across government to take a more holistic, person-centred approach* to family support.

⁹ Save the Children (2021) 'It would be nice to just feel secure'

¹⁰ Save the Children (2021) 'It would be nice to just feel secure'

We also support the commitment to a 'no wrong door' approach to accessing support and services. We welcome the commitment to investing in this through the £500 million Whole Family Wellbeing Fund. Every effort needs to be made to ensure that these commitments are implemented well. The Plan is less clear on the specific actions and steps that will be taken to deliver this, and we look forward to receiving more detail on this. Alongside our End Child Poverty Coalition partners we want to see a national approach and the step change in investment providing consistent support to any family who needs it.

6. Opportunities and support to enter, sustain and progress in work

- 6.1. Secure, flexible, and well-paid jobs are vital to reduce poverty and ensure every family has an adequate and secure income. We welcome the ambition and commitment in the Plan to a strengthened employment offer to parents based on transforming the way this is provided, taking a person-centred holistic approach. We welcome recognition that it is essential that the right infrastructure is in place to support parents to take up employment opportunities. Childcare, travel, and digital connectivity are vital and consistently raised as barriers to employment by parents. We warmly welcome the commitment to establish a lived experience panel to inform the development of this activity. We look forward to more information on how these interventions will be delivered and better understanding their intended impact. As the Plan recognises it will require a significant increase in the scale of support available and the focus on parents in the priority groups. The focus must be on delivering employment support that meets parents need, reaches a significant number of parents and does so as quickly as possible. A focus on learning and implementation to refine and develop this support will be crucial.
- 6.2. Returning to, or entering employment presents a significant transition for many parents, especially those with young children. It is a time when they need information and support from trusted and reliable sources. Employment can present an unknown change in circumstances and create a lot of anxiety. Most parents we spoke to about the Plan wanted to be in employment, but don't always feel it's possible. Parents often stress the importance of wraparound elements of support, like access to affordable childcare, help with the hidden costs of employment like childcare and transport and emotional and practical support in managing financial changes, transitioning into employment, or changing circumstances.
- 6.3. The success of the strengthened employment offer to parents relies on the availability of family friend jobs that offer the wages, hours, conditions, and flexibility to allow parents to support their families. We know that employment does not currently guarantee a route of poverty and far too many families are in in-work poverty. It is vital that we get the balance right between enabling parents

to take up employment and ensuring all jobs offer the wages, hours and conditions needed to allow parents to support their families and are available to all families. We welcome the government's vision for a different economy and labour market, but are less clear about the concrete steps that are needed/ will be taken to get from where we are now to that vision by 2030 and how this will impact on reducing child poverty. We would like to see more detail on plans to remove structural barriers to employment, the gender pay gap, becoming a fair work nation and improving pay and conditions in low paid sectors.

Childcare

- 6.4. Childcare is a crucial part of the infrastructure enabling parents, particularly mothers, to work. Affordable and accessible childcare helps reduce the risk of child poverty by allowing families to work and boost their incomes, and high-quality childcare helps to support children's learning and development. Increasing access to affordable childcare is seen as a priority issue for tackling child poverty by parents, especially lone parents. Lack of affordable, flexible, childcare is consistently raised by parents, especially parents of very young children, and lone parents, as a barrier to taking up or remaining in employment or increasing hours. It is still seen by many parents as more of a barrier to work than an enabler. Parents are concerned about the high costs, the complexity of accessing financial support and/ or services, lack of information about local childcare places and lack of availability of places outside of core hours.
- 6.5. Given the centrality of childcare to tackling child poverty and meeting the 2030 targets, we are disappointed not to see a more radical childcare ambition and specific commitments in this foundational policy area. The steps already taken to expand free childcare provision for young children and the progress made are welcome. We now need to see this extended to better support parents to access and stay in employment. The ability of childcare in the early years to support children's development as well as supporting parents with balancing employment is key.
- 6.6. We welcome the commitments in the Plan to strengthen the childcare offer by further developing early learning and childcare for children aged one and two, continuing to maximise take up for eligible twos and build a system of out of school care. And look forward to learning more about how this will be taken forward by the summer. We are pleased to see that families will be involved in developing the next steps. But it's not yet clear what the ambition of these commitments will be nor what specific actions will be taken. Action needs to start now to bring about the transformational changes needed to meet the 2030 targets. The focus must be on implementation of these commitments as quickly as possible. Save the Children supports recommendations from the Social Renewal Advisory Board and the National Council on Women and Girls to significantly expand funded early learning and childcare to provide 50 hours per

week of funded good quality flexible care for all children between 6 months and five years old, alongside a funded out of school care offer. We also want to see work to provide more flexibility in how childcare is provided to suit different family needs and provision that meets the need of disabled children.

7. Crossing cutting themes

Participation

7.1. We are pleased to see references throughout the Plan to the views of those with experience of poverty. We are also pleased to see commitments to involve those with experience of poverty (and from the six priority families) in the development of some activity, for example in relation to employability and childcare. We believe that children, young people, and parent/ carers priorities, needs and voices should be at the heart of Scotland's approach to tackling child poverty. We would like to see a stronger approach that embeds participation more fully in the work of the plan. It is essential that parents, children, and young people with experience of poverty fully inform the work in the Plan. Our chances of success will be maximised if we understand the needs and prioritise what works for families. Continuous, meaningful participation across the life of the Plan will allow it to be refined to ensure it is targeted and delivers what is needed.

Priority Groups and an inclusive approach

7.2. Tackling child poverty and meeting the targets requires a focus on improving outcomes for the priority groups – who make up 80% of families living in poverty. A lot of the actions state that it will focus on prioritising the needs of priority groups and this is welcome, as is the commitment to look at how to track the impact of policies on these groups. Monitoring the impact of the plan will need to carefully consider progress made in supporting each of the different groups and the intersectionality across family types. A measure of success needs to be that progress is made for all groups and the approaches we take to deliver services and support are inclusive.

Families with babies under one

7.3. For example, we know that more than a third of families with babies under one experience poverty in Scotland. And for many low-income families having a baby is associated with a reduced income making parenting harder during a crucial period of child development. It is not right and should never be the case that having a baby pushes a family into poverty. Nor that families with young children are more likely to access foodbanks in Scotland.¹¹ We have made good progress in supporting families with young children through a range of financial and practical policy interventions. Some families also receive financial support from their employers, but many families require more support than is currently

¹¹ Statham et al (2022) Tackling Child Poverty and Destitution. Save the Children and The Trussell Trust.

available through the social security system. We need to do more to consider how a more a more adequate level of income during a baby's first year could be provided. Therefore we need to take a serious look at the universal basic services and financial support available to this group.

Save the Children

Save the Children Scotland works to challenge poverty and provide a fair start for all children at risk of or experiencing poverty in Scotland. We work with families to understand what needs to be done to address child poverty and support families. We empower families to bring about positive changes to tackle poverty and its impact in communities and campaign for national 'solutions' for fairer childhoods - free from poverty. We provide crisis grants to families on low incomes and deliver a range of interventions and projects that support families with young children to engage in their children's learning and development.