

Programme for Government 2026-31

Briefing

August 2026

Summary

One Parent Families Scotland (OPFS) welcomes the Scottish Government's continued commitment to tackling child poverty and improving outcomes for children and families. However, despite the significant impact of policies such as the Scottish Child Payment, single parent families continue to experience some of the highest levels of poverty and financial insecurity in Scotland - with around a third of children in single parent families growing up without the resources that they need to thrive.

Overall, single parent families make up around one in four families with dependent children in Scotland, and yet they remain disproportionately affected by low incomes, insecure employment, rising housing costs and barriers to affordable childcare. With 92% being women, this means that supporting single parent families is also central to advancing gender equality - with an intrinsic link existing between women's poverty and child poverty.

The next Programme for Government provides a crucial opportunity to accelerate progress towards Scotland's 2030 statutory child poverty targets, by placing single parent families at the heart of policy design and delivery. Further and faster action is urgently needed to reach these targets, particularly in relation to the six priority family groups.

OPFS is therefore calling on the Scottish Government to:

- Increase the Scottish Child Payment to £40 at the earliest opportunity - with targeted additional payments for families with a baby under one, single parent families and families impacted by disability.
- Mitigate the Young Parent Penalty through the Scottish Child Payment.
- Continue to invest in financial inclusion and debt services, to ensure that families receive all of the financial support that they are entitled to.
- 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.
- Continue to invest in child maintenance support for single parent families in Scotland.
- Deliver affordable, flexible childcare that supports single parents to access, remain in and progress in work.
- Improve access to fair, flexible, employment and skills opportunities.
- Take decisive action to address housing insecurity and homelessness.

These actions will not only improve outcomes for single parent families but will have wider impacts on policy areas such as education, employment and training, child poverty and human rights.

Why single parent families must remain a Programme for Government priority

Scotland has demonstrated that policy choices can, and do, make a meaningful difference to family incomes, and that child poverty is not inevitable. Investments in devolved social security in recent years have helped to reduce poverty and provided vital financial security for many households.

However, we still have a long way to go.

Single parent families continue to experience disproportionately high rates of poverty. As sole carers and sole earners they must rely on a single income while also balancing caring responsibilities. They additionally face significant barriers in relation to accessing flexible and secure employment, accessing childcare that is flexible, accessible, and affordable and meeting housing costs.

In addition, single parent families often belong to more than one priority family group, with single parents being more likely than couple parents to be from an ethnic minority background, more than twice as likely to be disabled themselves and are more likely to have a disabled child in the household.

At OPFS, we see the impact of all of this on the families we support. Meeting the 2030 child poverty targets cannot be achieved without targeted measures to also reduce child poverty rates amongst single parent families.

The next Programme for Government should therefore recognise single parent families as a priority group across all relevant portfolios, ensuring that policy is designed around the realities of family life, rather than expecting families to adapt to systems that remain fragmented, inflexible and challenging to navigate.

Policy priorities

Social security

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.

Many of the families that we support at OPFS, are living on an inadequate income, struggling to make ends meet. Social security is an essential lifeline for them. While the Scottish Child Payment has transformed support for many families, the continued pressure of rising living costs means that further action is required.

The Scottish Government should therefore continue to strengthen Scotland's social security system - maximising the value of devolved powers.

OPFS is calling on the Scottish Government to:

- Increase the Scottish Child Payment to £40 at the earliest opportunity - with targeted additional payments for families with a baby under one, single parent families and families impacted by disability.
- Commit to following the roadmap to a Minimum Income Guarantee set out by the expert advisory group.
- Mitigate the Young Parent Penalty through the Scottish Child Payment.
- Continue to invest in financial inclusion and debt services, to ensure that families receive all of the financial support that they are entitled to.
- 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.

Child maintenance

If all separated families in Scotland had a child maintenance arrangement in place, around £200 million would be paid to around 100,000 children, lifting about 20,000 children out of poverty.

Having worked extensively alongside single parents over the past three years to understand key challenges in accessing support through the child maintenance system, our research clearly demonstrates that the current system is not working for either paying or receiving parents.

In 2026, the Scottish Government committed to fund specialist child maintenance advice services for families, to ensure that they are able to navigate the child maintenance system and that children receive money that they have the right to. This service will support families across Scotland to understand complex systems, and at the same time work on a policy level to influence systems change longer term.

OPFS is calling on the Scottish Government to:

- Continue to invest in child maintenance support and advice for single parent families in Scotland.

Education

While access to education is free for school-aged children in Scotland, we know all too well that there are many hidden costs to the school day which are required to ensure that children have what they need to learn effectively. These include but are not limited to: costs related to nutrition, uniform, school trips and school supplies.

Single parent families often tell us that keeping up with costs of school uniform, in particular, can be challenging when children are frequently outgrowing existing items. OPFS is calling on the Scottish Government to:

- Increase the School Clothing Grant, and the income threshold for accessing this, in line with inflation, and ensure that eligible families are auto enrolled.
- Extend free school meals to all primary school pupils and commit to introducing universal free school meal provision for all pupils in secondary schools.

Higher Education

Higher Education is a vital pathway for single parents seeking long term economic stability for their families and for their own career advancement. However, numerous barriers - financial, institutional and personal – currently limit their ability to enrol in, continue in and complete their studies.

Following initial research, funded by The Robertson Trust, OPFS is currently undertaking a multi-year project which explores systems change to facilitate enhanced access to Higher Education for single parent students. Our recommendations are based upon our early findings from this work – informed by the lived experience of single parents.

OPFS is calling on the Scottish Government to:

- Publish clear information about financial support available to single parent students and how this interacts with paid work and social security systems.
- Review the adequacy of the tailored financial support for single parents entering Higher Education.
- Integrate the voices of single parent students into policy development to help ‘single parent proof’ access to Higher Education.
- Include single parent status within widening access eligibility criteria.

Fair work

“I was always really worried about applying for jobs. [...] I thought asking for flexibility around my daughter was an excuse or too much of a big ask.”

Single parent who used the OPFS Childcare Connector service

Employment is a strong route out of poverty for some families, but only where work is secure, fairly paid and genuinely compatible with caring responsibilities. It is, however, untrue that work alone is the key route out of poverty for families, as 75% of all children in poverty in Scotland have at least one working parent.

Too many single parents remain systemically excluded from employment opportunities because employment is inflexible, insecure or fails to reflect the realities of raising children alone. This often excludes single parents from full participation within the labour market and

perpetuates poverty for their families.

Access to employment is one of the challenges routinely raised by the single parent families that we support across Scotland, with managing employment alongside childcare being a consistent theme – particularly in relation to finding childcare placements that are affordable and flexible around work requirements.

OPFS is calling on the Scottish Government to:

- Expand access to quality employability programmes designed around single parents' needs.
- Ensure that employers are aware of the unique needs of single parents and work collaboratively to 'single parent proof' new policies and existing provisions.
- Increase opportunities for flexible, family-friendly employment across the public sector - and encouraging wider adoption by employers.
- Support single parent progression into higher-paid work through training, skills and lifelong learning.

Childcare

"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."

Single parent who used the OPFS Childcare Connector service

Accessible, affordable and flexible childcare is critical for supporting single parent families to thrive. 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, have marked 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.

At OPFS, support with childcare is one of the top issues parents contact us about and, right now, we are seeing a concerning increase in the number of parents who come to us with childcare debt.

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 entitlement of 50 hours per week for children aged six 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.

Housing

Every child has a right to grow up in a safe and secure home, and yet too many families in Scotland face unaffordable rents, poor quality housing and the long-term impacts on mental health and wellbeing that these challenges perpetuate.

In particular, the ongoing housing emergency continues to place disproportionate pressure on single parent households. As sole earners, single parents pay a higher proportion of their income on housing costs. This is compounded by the limited availability of suitable homes and ultimately places single parent families at a greater risk of homelessness.

OPFS is calling on the Scottish Government to:

- End the long-term use of temporary accommodation, and ensure that high quality, affordable and accessible accommodation is available for families at the earliest opportunity.
- Accelerate the delivery of new, affordable homes that are suitable for families.
- Improve housing advice and support for families experiencing financial hardship, to ensure that families are aware of their rights.
- Ensure that national and local housing strategies recognise the specific needs of single parent households.

Wellbeing Economy and climate justice

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.

We are additionally advocates for a Wellbeing Economy. Right now, people in Scotland are feeling let down by a system that is stacked against them. For too many, the economy simply is not working. We have the opportunity to transform our economy, delivering good lives for all people in Scotland and protects our natural environment. An economy anchored in dignity, fairness, nature, purpose and participation.

OPFS is calling on the Scottish 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.
- Commit to building a Wellbeing Economy in Scotland by redesigning our economy so that it delivers social justice on a healthy planet. This requires economic policies to be focused on dignity, nature, participation, purpose and fairness.

Tax

OPFS is calling on the Scottish Government 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.

Conclusion

Scotland has already demonstrated that ambitious policy decisions can reduce child poverty and improve lives. The next Programme for Government should continue to build on this progress by focusing on families most at risk of being left behind.

Investing in single parent families is one of the most effective ways to reduce child poverty, improve gender equality, strengthen children's rights and strengthen our economy. We all benefit when single parent families thrive.

Throughout the delivery of the next Programme for Government, OPFS is ready to work with the Scottish Government, Scottish Parliament and partner organisations across the third and public sectors to ensure that every single parent family has the security, opportunities and support they need to thrive.

About One Parent Families Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland 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 BAME, disabled and young single parents face multiple structural barriers affecting access to services and opportunities.

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