

# MSP BRIEFING FOR SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT DEBATE: PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT – ERADICATING CHILD POVERTY



3<sup>rd</sup> September 2026

*“I’m stuck in a rut and without financial support from people like Aberlour, I don’t know what I’d do. Sometimes I feel like I’m in a hole and I can see the ladders but I can’t reach them.” (Parent supported by Aberlour)*

## Key Messages

- The First Minister’s continued commitment to “eradicating child poverty” is clear in its ambition and we welcome it
- Ending child poverty and meeting Scotland’s child poverty targets must mean that ambition is backed by clear and targeted actions, significant investment and a coherent plan
- Increasing incomes and putting more money in families’ pockets is the most direct and immediate way to tackle child poverty, and further investment in the Scottish Child Payment remains the best way to achieve that
- Accessible whole family support is vital to respond to the impact of poverty in the lives of children and their families and must include the necessary combination of practical, emotional and financial support that families need to help them thrive
- Guaranteeing support for all children and families living in poverty must mean long term funding and investment at scale to deliver the support that will help create sustainable routes out of poverty for families
- Scotland’s poorest families are in the grip of a public debt crisis and tackling public debt is vital to helping end child poverty

## About Aberlour

Aberlour is the largest solely Scottish children’s charity. Delivering more than sixty services, we work with babies, children, young people and families, providing services and support in communities across Scotland. We work with them to overcome challenges including the impact of drugs and alcohol, growing up in and leaving care, poor mental health, living with a disability, experience of domestic abuse, and the impact of poverty and disadvantage. Aberlour offers compassionate support to babies, children, young people and families and supports them in their journey to heal and grow. Aberlour is a member of the End Child Poverty Coalition.

## Ending Child Poverty

**More than 1 in 5 children in Scotland continue to live in poverty. This Scottish Parliament must be the parliament where we prioritise ending child poverty above all else. Our most disadvantaged families remain in the midst of a cost of living crisis, and much more action is needed in Scotland over the next five years to advance and sustain reductions in child poverty.**

Children have a right to grow up free from poverty and for their families to get the help and support they need to help them to thrive. Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament have a duty to uphold these rights.

The Programme for Government sets out a range of actions that it identifies will contribute to tackling child poverty. We welcome many of these commitments – including increasing the Scottish Child Payment for families with a baby under one, expansion of free school meals and the delivery of whole family support – and recognise that individually and in combination some will have a real impact helping to tackle the impact of poverty in children and families' lives. What is unclear is the level of investment that will follow in order to deliver on these and other commitments with many actions announced by the First Minister absent of any identified level of funding to deliver on them.

The Programme for Government does not significantly add to or build on the Scottish Government's Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan – [Bringing Hope, Building Futures](#) – that was published earlier this year. Aberlour and others highlighted concerns that the actions contained in the plan fail to meet the ambition to “eradicate child poverty” and are potentially inconsistent with duties set out in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. The Programme for Government provides nothing further to show how the Scottish Government intends to achieve this ambition.

The Scottish Child Payment remains the single most effective and immediate mechanism available to the Scottish Government for reducing child poverty. We know social security alone will not end child poverty, however increasing incomes and putting more money in families' pockets is the most direct way to tackle child poverty and the Scottish Child Payment has already driven progress on poverty reduction in Scotland. Families we work with tell us the difference it is making in their lives.

**We continue to call on the Scottish Government to commit to an immediate increase to the Scottish Child Payment to at least £40 per week for all eligible families, rising to £55 by the end of this parliament.**

## Whole Family Support

Alongside continued support to increase family incomes through social security, Scottish Government must go further and faster to reach child poverty targets by 2030/31 through the delivery of a transformational programme of whole family support. This demands further targeted actions to tackle the specific and often intersecting challenges in families' lives and help lift the most disadvantaged families across Scotland out of poverty for good. Keeping The Promise means guaranteeing all families the help and support they need, for as long as they need it. **Public service reform means adapting and improving how our services work for families.**

The right to family support must be recognised on an equal footing to a child's right to health services and education. We must remove the root causes of poverty and disadvantage, such as inadequate income, lack of affordable housing, and limited access to education and fair work. Poverty is preventable not inevitable, but only with system change, not more of the same. Scotland must develop a new model of holistic whole family support to lift families out of poverty for good. All families who need extra help should have access to the support they need within their community. Families experiencing the greatest disadvantage should benefit from targeted and individualised support that tackles the intersecting issues which are trapping them in poverty. This must include:

- accessible and sustainable services located in communities responding to the often-intersecting challenges families face;
- the necessary combination of practical, emotional and financial support that families need to help them thrive;
- relationship based support, from early help to more intensive support as required, that gets alongside families able to respond to challenges before they become crises.

We welcome the key focus on whole family support in the Programme for Government including the ongoing commitment to the delivery of the £20 million Whole Family Support Third Sector Delivery Fund. Alongside this we welcome further commitments to “work with partners to build on existing best practice to progress an integrated Whole Family Support programme” and the multi-year funding to deliver this. We believe whole family support delivered at scale and with the level of investment required to meet the needs of all families who need extra help and support can help contribute to the alleviation of child poverty in Scotland. However, the current scale and level of investment is wholly inadequate to deliver this.

The Third Sector is vital to the delivery of whole family support and has been at the forefront of developing and delivering whole family support services in communities across Scotland for decades. The Third Sector must be recognised as a key partner involved in the development and delivery of a Whole Family Support Programme, alongside local authorities and other public sector partners. Crucially, the voices of children, families and communities themselves must sit at the heart of any transformational change programme in order to influence and inform how best whole family support services can respond to challenges in their lives.

**We continue to call on the Scottish Government to deliver the significant and transformational investment required to deliver accessible whole family support services at a scale that help to create sustainable routes out of poverty for all families across Scotland who need extra help.**

## **Tackling Public Debt**

Scotland's poorest households are in the grip of a public debt crisis. Public debt intensifies and sustains child poverty. The systems put in place to recover public debt often have the effect of pushing families further and deeper into poverty. The most common debt of this kind is council tax arrears, but often also includes housing and rent arrears, benefit payments deductions, and even school meal debt. Public debt is felt most sharply by families on the lowest incomes and too often traps families in poverty.

It is projected that nearly £1 billion will be lost by low income households in Scotland over this parliamentary term due to Universal Credit deductions. Aberlour's research has shown that 55% of families with children receiving Universal Credit in Scotland have public debt, and around half of households accessing debt advice services across Scotland are seeking help with public debt. On average low income families with children in Scotland in receipt of Universal Credit are seeing their incomes reduced by around £1000 per year by deductions alone.

Between 2023 and 2025, 70,000 children in Scotland and their families had school meal debt. Women are disproportionately more likely to be impacted by public debt, in particular single parents and women living in households affected by disability. Urgent and compassionate reforms to public debt recovery are required to tackle child poverty, support families, uphold children's human rights, and ensure every child and family has the opportunity to thrive.

We welcome the commitments in the Programme for Government which will help to alleviate the impact of public debt for some. This includes support for victim-survivors of financial abuse and coercive control through further investment in financial inclusion support, and through concluding the review of joint and several liability rules for council tax debt and how they currently impact victim-survivors. We also welcome the commitment to consider any changes required to make council tax debt recovery processes fairer. In addition, we welcome the ongoing commitment to write off school meal debt – an issue Aberlour has long campaigned on - to help families impacted by the ongoing cost of living crisis who struggle to feed their children at home let alone at school. The further expansion of Free School Meals to more low income families will help to reduce instances of school meal debt.

Much more will be required to tackle public debt over the course of this Parliament to help ensure public debt no longer traps children and their families in poverty. This must mean bringing forward the necessary legislative, policy and practice changes to the way Scotland

recovers public debt aligned to existing children's rights and human rights duties to tackle the public debt crisis and to help end child poverty.

**We continue to call on the Scottish Government to end school meal debt and hidden school hunger for good by expanding free school meals to all low income families and continuing the School Meal Debt Fund until it is no longer needed.**

**We continue to call on the Scottish Government to bring forward the necessary legislative, policy and practice changes to the way Scotland recovers public debt aligned to existing children's rights and human rights duties to tackle the public debt crisis and to help end child poverty.**

**For more information contact Martin Canavan (Head of Policy & Influencing)**

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