

Dear First Minister,

As a broad coalition of national organisations, community groups, academics, trade unions and faith groups who share a concern for the wellbeing of families across the country, we are writing to you today to express our grave concern. The coronavirus crisis is putting low income families under financial strain which risks long term consequences for Scotland's children.

We have all welcomed your government's commitment to ending child poverty, the leadership that you have shown in setting the 2030 child poverty targets, and the continued prioritisation of the Scottish Child Payment as a key policy supporting these ambitions. It is vital that the coronavirus crisis does not undermine these goals. That is why we have also warmly welcomed the significant support already provided by the Scottish Government in response to the crisis, including through the Wellbeing Fund and additional investment in the Scottish Welfare Fund. We have appreciated the opportunities many of us have had to engage with your Ministers and officials to help inform your government's response.

However, despite this support, and uplifts to UK benefits, families across Scotland are struggling to stay afloat. Families that were already more likely to experience poverty – such as lone parent families – are being particularly impacted, and are being pulled deeper into poverty. This is particularly true as women are more likely to be experiencing poverty, have disproportionate responsibility for caring for children and account for 91% of lone parents. Women's poverty is inextricably interlinked with child poverty.

It is clear that progress on tackling child poverty is being put at huge risk.

An out of work family with two children is still being left with an income 20% below the poverty line, a poverty line that in itself is well below the income the general public believe is needed for a minimum socially acceptable standard of living. The families that many of our organisations work with are reporting increased financial stress and associated anxiety, loneliness, and more complex mental health problems. The charitable hardship funds many of us operate have come under massively increased pressure, with, for example, a 1400% increase in demand for Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund.

In the face of this increased hardship our organisations continue to call for the UK Government to take action to ensure that UK social security system protects people from poverty. However, we believe that where any level of government can do more to loosen the grip of poverty than it must. We therefore believe that the time has come to build on the existing investments made by your government and the emergency provision provided by children's charities and others, and **provide a direct financial boost to all low income families**. The £10 per week Scottish Child Payment will be a vital lifeline, but will not start to be delivered until next year. Families need a lifeline now to help them weather this storm.

We call on you to use every tool at your government's disposal to deliver an emergency package of financial support to all low income families – a package we believe should amount to at least the equivalent of £10 per week per child.

**Options** for delivering such an emergency package that we have identified include the following:

- Using **Best Start legislation and payment systems** to introduce new or increased payments of Best Start Grants.
- Investing further in **the Scottish Welfare Fund** to provide a new coronavirus crisis grant for all low income families, whilst retaining and boosting the capacity of the existing Fund to support all those facing income crisis.

- Increasing **School Clothing Grant payments**.
- **Topping up benefits that go to families to help with the costs of raising children** - many organisations have called on the UK Government to increase child benefit, the child element of Universal Credit, and child tax credit in response to the crisis. The Scottish Government also has the powers to top up UK benefits.
- Using **local government powers** to provide payments to advance the wellbeing of children, for example under s22 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 or via financial support under the power in s20 of the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003. These could be used to provide equivalent financial support, particularly to families with no recourse to public funds.

**Additional targeted support** could include:

- Increase the value of **Best Start Foods**.
- Providing a **crisis grant for families awaiting their first Universal Credit payment**.
- To support families impacted by the two-child limit, by making additional direct payments to families affected. Larger families were at increased risk of poverty even before the current COVID-19 crisis.
- To further **increase the Discretionary Housing Payment budget**, and direct local authorities to target additional funds towards those affected by the benefit cap. By increasing the DHP budget, those households impacted by the benefit cap can receive the additional support they need.

We understand that to identify the most effective delivery option, judgements will need to be made based on organisational capacity within local authorities and Social Security Scotland, and the ability to engage and work with UK agencies. It may well be that a combination of the options is needed to deliver this quickly. Whatever approach is taken the overriding priority must be to use the powers and structures available in Scotland to give an immediate cash boost to all low income families to support them through the current crisis. This will be an essential foundation on which to build the full package of financial, practical and emotional support needed to protect children's wellbeing as we transition from the crisis to recovery, in line with the principles in your government's Covid-19 Framework for Decision Making.

We are keen to work with you constructively to find practical and effective ways of achieving this, and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

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Jackie Brock, Chief Executive, Children in Scotland

Mary Glasgow, Chief Executive, Children 1st

Satwat Rehman, Chief Executive, OPFS

Jamie Livingstone, Head of Oxfam Scotland

Peter Kelly, Director, The Poverty Alliance

Claire Telfer, Head of Scotland, Save the Children

Tracey McFall, CEO, Partners in Advocacy

Dr Neil Henery, Director, Camphill Scotland

Clare Cable, Chief Executive and Nurse Director, Queen's Nursing Institute Scotland

Alistair Brown, National Director, Scottish Association of Social Work

Justina Murray, CEO, Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs

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Prof Morag Treanor, Heriot-Watt University

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Ella Simpson, Chief Executive, EVOG

Duncan Dunlop, CEO, Who Cares? Scotland

Jimmy Wilson, CEO, FARE Scotland

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Dr Hartwig Pautz, Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences at the University of the West of Scotland and co-lead of the UWS-Oxfam Partnership

Mike J Kirby, Scottish Secretary, UNISON

Professor Mhairi Mackenzie, Professor of Public Policy, University of Glasgow

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Mark O'Donnell, Chief Executive, Royal Blind

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Billy Watson, Chief Executive, Scottish Association for Mental Health

Alan Thornburrow, Director, Business in the Community Scotland

Juliet Harris, Director, Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)

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Janet Haugh, Chief Executive, Ypeople

Cath Morrison, Chief Executive, The Lilius Graham Trust

Dr Mhairi Crawford, Chief Executive, LGBT Youth Scotland

Pat Rafferty, Scottish Secretary, Unite the Union

Professor Stephen Sinclair, Co-Director, Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit, Glasgow Caledonian University

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Professor Steve Turner, Scottish Officer, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Kate Wimpress, Chair, SURF – Scotland's Regeneration Forum

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