



'You just see the prices go up...': Families' experiences of in-work poverty in Scotland and implications for children's human rights

Policy briefing

Serving the Future

April 2024

This policy briefing presents key findings and offers recommendations to policymakers at the mid-point of a three-year action research project on in-work poverty and the hospitality sector – with a particular focus on children and families.

This briefing outlines initial considerations towards a comprehensive Scottish policy landscape which delivers children's rights and tackles child poverty once and for all, highlighting:

- Key human rights concerns for children experiencing poverty.
- Opportunities to align and strengthen child poverty and child rights legal and policy frameworks in Scotland.
- Case studies on families' experiences of in-work poverty in the hospitality sector in Scotland and impact on children's human rights.
- Recommendations for Scottish human rights duty-bearers navigating the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act, Tackling Child Poverty Action Plan, and other relevant developments.

Introduction

1 in 4 children in Scotland are currently living in poverty.¹ It is now more common in Scotland to be in working poverty than it is to be in poverty and out of work, with 170,000 children living in households where at least one person works each year.² In addition, real income from work for those on the lowest incomes has not risen significantly since 1995-98, while income from social security has fallen. As a result, paid employment and the social security net does not currently provide adequate guarantees that children's lives, and the lives of their families, caregivers, community, and society will be protected from the multifaceted, widespread consequences of living in poverty.

This policy brief presents emerging findings and policy recommendations from the *Serving the Future* project - a three-year action research project seeking to understand, reduce and prevent in-work poverty with a specific focus on the hospitality sector – specifically concerning implications for children and their human rights. The brief considers:

- Key human rights concerns for children experiencing poverty.
- Opportunities to align and strengthen child poverty and child rights legal and policy frameworks in Scotland.
- Case studies on families' experiences of in-work poverty in the hospitality sector in Scotland and impact on children's human rights.
- Recommendations for Scottish human rights duty-bearers navigating the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act, Tackling Child Poverty Action Plan, and other relevant developments.

In full, this Brief outlines initial considerations towards a comprehensive Scottish policy landscape which delivers children's rights and tackles child poverty once and for all.

Policy Background

Child poverty is both a cause and consequence of children's human rights violations.³

Child Poverty

Poverty has a significant and widespread impact on all aspects of children's lives. Depriving some children, or groups of children, of resources and opportunities central to their early development widens inequalities between those children and their peers. Early foundations of inequality in childhood can create life-long multifaceted harms which follow children into adolescence and adulthood, presenting challenges for human rights protection and the well-being of families, communities, and societies as a whole.⁴ Furthermore, some children are at heightened risk of living in poverty, such as those living in households with single parents, young mothers, a baby under one, three or more children, and families with, often intersecting, protected characteristics such as households with disabled children and minority ethnic households.⁵

For more than a decade, eradicating child poverty has been a Scottish policy priority. The introduction of the Child Poverty Act 2010 and Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, alongside several other policy developments, set targets to significantly reduce child poverty by 2030. Policies to meet these targets include:

- Local authority child poverty action plans (2017): Each of Scotland's 32 local authorities, in partnership with their local NHS Board, has a statutory obligation under the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 to publish an annual Local Child Poverty Action Report where they must demonstrate how they are tackling child poverty.

- Early years childcare expansion (2021): Free childcare provision for 3 and 4-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds (around 30 hours a week during term time).
- Social security (2016 onwards): Best Start Grants and Best Start Foods were introduced for low-income families between 2018 and 2019. In 2022, Scottish Child Payment, a weekly £25 top-up benefit, was extended to all children under 16 for households claiming Universal Credit.

Despite these developments, analysis of child poverty data shows that there has been limited progress in reducing child poverty in Scotland. In its 2024 UK Poverty Report, JRF highlighted that lower child poverty rates in Scotland (in comparison to England and Wales) are likely, at least in part, due to the Scottish Child Payment and the positive effect benefits can have in reducing poverty.⁶ However, JRF's 2023 Poverty in Scotland Report highlighted that the growth of in-work poverty is holding back further progress. In addition, the Poverty and Inequality Commission, an advisory public body which provides independent advice and scrutiny to Scottish Ministers on poverty and inequality, noted that whilst the Scottish Child Payment 'represents significant progress in tackling child poverty', it is unlikely that the Scottish Government will meet the 2023-24 interim statutory target of 18%.⁷ This is supported by latest data from 2022-23 which shows an increase in relative child poverty to 26%.⁸

Children's Human Rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the international human rights treaty which considers the fundamental rights of all children – defined as all humans under the age of 18.⁹ The UNCRC is the most widely ratified of any international human rights treaty, with almost universal sign-up or formal consent. It considers the human rights that apply to us all, through the distinct lens of childhood. Children's human rights consider what is required for them to fulfil their potential – including rights which consider their survival and development, health, education, play and rest, non-discrimination, protection from violence, etc. The UNCRC also considers those with a fundamental role to play to facilitate the realisation of children's human rights, including governments, public authorities, and parents, guardians, and families.

The United Kingdom ratified the UNCRC in 1991. As an instrument of international human rights law, the Convention has a long history in Scotland as an international consideration, and as part of several national frameworks. It forms the basis of Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC), Scotland's Child Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments, The Promise Scotland, and a host of non-statutory guidance for public authorities and children and young people on claiming their rights.¹⁰

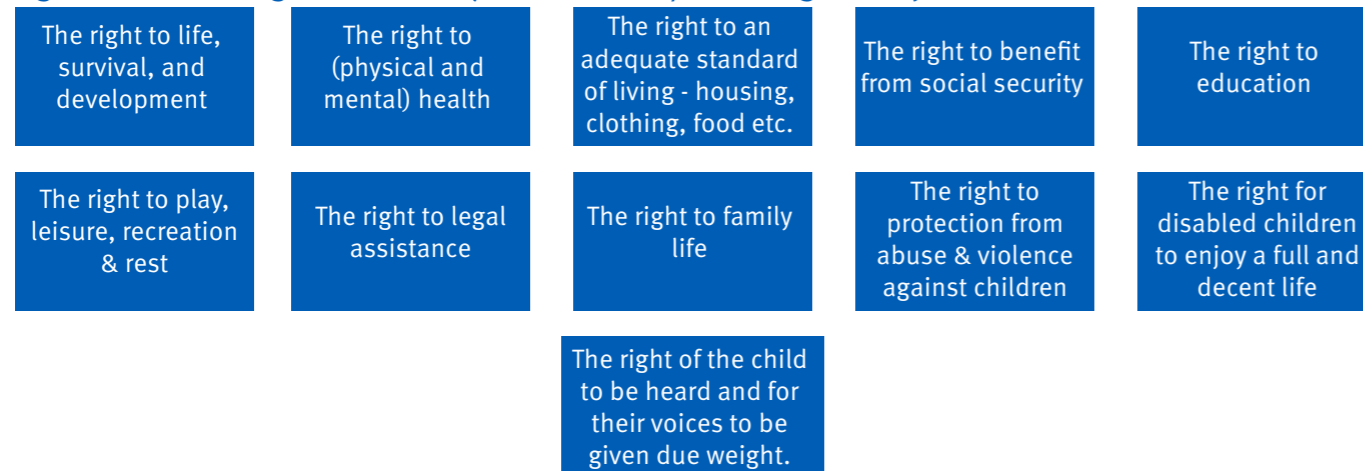
The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 brings the Convention into Scots law, making Scotland the first devolved government to make children's human rights enforceable in law, policy, and practice. The Act ensures that all Acts of the Scottish Parliament, and public authorities delivering these duties, must act compatibly with children's human rights. It will require all public authorities in Scotland to take proactive steps to protect, respect, and fulfil children's human rights. In addition, the UNCRC Act introduces new mechanisms for accountability. It introduces new avenues for children, young people, and their representatives – like the Children and Young People's Commissioner – to enforce their rights and access to justice and remedies through the Scottish judicial system.

The Act comes into force throughout 2024, with earlier introduction of guidance for public authorities and courts, and later commencement for the legislative compatibility duty. Despite the Act making good progress to provide legal obligations and accountability to children's human rights, it is important to note that the Act excludes what is reserved to the UK Parliament – including UK-based legislation and some Convention rights like the right to acquire a nationality, family reunification, recruitment into the armed forces, etc.

Children’s Human Rights in the Context of Poverty

Living in poverty obstructs children from experiencing the most fundamental principles of human rights – dignity, equality, freedom, fairness, respect, autonomy. However, as demonstrated by Figure 1, the human rights concerns for children in situations of poverty are extensive, with real consequences for children reaching their full potential and enjoying a happy and healthy childhood. The following UNCRC rights have been highlighted as key human rights concerns in the context of child poverty¹¹:

Figure 1: Human Rights Concerns for Children Experiencing Poverty



In 2021, the Children and Young People’s Commissioner noted that ‘poverty is the single biggest breach of children’s human rights in Scotland.’¹² The latest Concluding Observations on the UK by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also expressed ‘with deep concern the number of children living in poverty...’ and recommended that the UK and Devolved Governments ‘develop or strengthen existing policies, with clear targets, measurable indicators and robust monitoring and accountability mechanisms, to end child poverty...’¹³

The recent incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots law is anticipated to ignite and accelerate progress. The commencement of this Act is an opportunity to reprioritise and reinvigorate policy and practice to respect, protect and fulfil children’s human rights in Scotland. Given the significant and widespread impact of poverty in Scotland, the success of efforts to bring children’s rights home must be measured against progress to eradicate child poverty.

This Brief outlines initial considerations towards a comprehensive Scottish policy landscape which delivers children’s rights and tackles child poverty once and for all.

Children & Families Case Studies

The case studies below share experiences of in-work poverty from three parents, drawn from longitudinal interviews conducted as part of the Serving the Future project. Their experiences are presented through direct quotes and narration, followed by a supplementary section highlighting human rights considerations.

Jackie¹⁴ lives in an urban area in a two-parent household with one child who is under the age of one.

In her first interview, Jackie was living with her partner and baby and was on maternity leave. She was receiving Maternity Allowance of around £600 a month, for nine months. She was about to receive her last maternity allowance payment and was worried as she was not sure what was happening with her employment.

At the time of her second interview six months later, Jackie’s baby was 1. After months of discussions with her employer during her maternity leave, she had had to resign as they had not conceded to adjust her hours or timings of her shifts to support her to return to work. Jackie said she did not want to return to the hospitality sector and instead wanted a more flexible job where she could prioritise being with her toddler.

During the time between both interviews, Jackie’s partner had not been in employment for a couple of months. As a result, she had had to draw heavily on savings and work as self-employed whilst looking after her 1-year-old. And so, Jackie talked about the impact of increased cost-of-living on her family:

“...huge. So I actually go to collect things for free from places, either I find them on Gumtree, Facebook, or there’s a few different community places that I know. I do, I like to drive, and I know the baby sleeps when I drive, so that’s my little luxury.”

The stress of trying to manage on the household’s low income affected Jackie’s wellbeing. She said she was very tired and had no time to herself.

“A lot more stressful, like internally, mentally. I think my partner, he just doesn’t... he thinks everything’s okay. And he doesn’t see all the small things I do every day, like that changes things. So for me it’s just a big negative thing.”

By the time of the second interview, Jackie’s partner was now in full-time employment. Jackie found managing childcare full-time, alongside working self-employed, really challenging. She had been able to access free counselling through a community organisation which had been really helpful for her. Whilst the service usually provides up-to 15 weeks of counselling, they had extended her support to a year.

Jackie had done a lot of research online about local organisations that provide free clothing and activities for babies/toddlers. A weekly group ran by a charity provided her with a ‘relaxing space’. She said that her Health Visitor had also provided a little bit of support at the beginning through directing her to local organisations but shared:

“...part from that, I don’t think it’s like a real connection. Like you... for me, that, I wouldn’t think to phone her up and ask, ‘oh, I’m struggling today, do you know this or that?’ Like that’s not how I... I view it.”

Jackie was confused by advice she had been given on social security entitlement. At the second wave interview, she was not receiving Universal Credit and therefore not able to receive the Scottish Child Payment or Best Start Food and Grants. After speaking to her doctor, she applied for Adult Disability Payment, but her claim was unsuccessful.

Jackie was worried about the future and how the family would manage. She reflected:

“Cause that would be lovely, to just have some allowance if mums can choose not to go back to work, and there was like a programme or something for wellbeing. Because it’s not just the first year that’s difficult, it’s like the second year that actually puts the toll on... and then you realise like there’s a lot more... they’re not a baby anymore, it’s not just breast milk, it’s like bigger things, they need things, and then she’ll be on a bike soon. I don’t know, like that’s all things that you, you need money for.”

Kora lives in a rural area in a two-parent household with two children, one under the age of three.

Kora has been working in hospitality for eight years. Five weeks into Covid restrictions, she was made redundant whilst on maternity leave.

“Yeah, that was... that was probably one of the worst things... so I was on maternity leave, and we were contacted by the company to say that you now have to contact this certain person about maternity leave, in the Government. So I contacted them, and they told me it was sixteen weeks before I would receive a payment. But if I’d went and got, received any like Universal Credits or anything, I would lose my maternity pay completely.”

She currently works in a hotel and has a zero-hour contract on a permanent basis. Kora is also working on getting a college qualification to hopefully move out of the industry. However, recently when the hotel was quiet, hours were taken off housekeeping staff. As a result, most housekeeping staff work extra hours to protect themselves and their pay. Previously, Kora worked a weekly night shift. However, after discussing with her partner, they made the decision that time at home with family was worth more than the financial loss.

“We had, like, a long discussion about it and I was, like, “I just don’t think it’s, like – as much as the money helps, like, I – I don’t really get to spend or do anything with the kids, really.”

Kora and her partner are ineligible for the Scottish Child Payment. As her youngest is under the age of three, she isn’t yet entitled to public nursery care. Kora cannot afford childcare and relies on her family to look after her children when both her and her partner are at work. If she did have to pay out of pocket, she noted that she wouldn’t be able to provide other key essentials.

Kora has noticed a steep rise in the cost of electricity and heating, and has tried to limit their use as much as possible. She finds it difficult to provide the essentials and still protect their children from their money worries:

“I’m like trying to like keep the heating off and stuff, but the other week my wee boy was like, “can we have the heating on, it’s really cold in here...” And I was like, yeah, right, okay, putting the heating on... They don’t understand, so it’s like I’ll take the hit of more money, because it’s just easier. Well not really easier, but like they don’t understand, like I don’t want them to know money’s like a struggle or anything.”

She has also struggled with sharp increases in the cost of nutritious food and is making difficult decisions on the quantity and quality of food she can provide. Kora’s gran takes them food shopping quite frequently and helped out when Kora was waiting for maternity pay. Still, she mentions eating less and balancing expensive food choices:

“It’s just the food is, like, the big thing and my kids, I always like to – they’re big fruit and veg fans as well, like. If you’re to offer one of them, like, chocolate or strawberries, they’ll take the strawberries. They just love it, and I’m, like, I can’t afford to keep up an amount of, like, fruit that you are eating, but then I also don’t want to be, like, “Oh no, you can’t eat that.” Like, I’d rather that they ate what they wanted and they – because I don’t – they’re so young, I don’t want to be, like, “Oh, you know, like, I can’t afford to be buying you stuff all the time.” [...]

Kora also struggles to access support and charitable services like food banks, as she lives in a rural village community.

“In [the village] there isn’t really like any... we don’t have food banks and things like that. If... well the food went to our local doctors, they’ve got like a thing that they can like forward you onto for [town nearby], to go to [town 30 minutes’ drive away] and get like help with their food banks. But in the actual community, there’s... there’s nothing that... because it’s such a small community, like there’s not really anything.”

Izzy is a single parent living in an urban area and has one child who is under the age of three.

In her first interview, Izzy had a young baby and was on maternity leave. Her income at this point included statutory maternity pay (£295 every 2 weeks), Universal Credit, Child Benefit, the Scottish Child Payment, Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods. She did not receive child maintenance.

Izzy said that she was “barely” managing financially, and was worried about the increased cost of essentials:

“Like I can have one meal a day and I’m fine, and he obviously just has his milk. But by the time it comes to the whole giving him food I’m a bit worried, because every time I go to a shop it’s... you just see the prices go up.”

Despite being in receipt of some support, Izzy’s maternity pay and benefits did not cover her bills and essentials, and she had to seek out further temporary support via a discretionary housing payment:

“I was having to top up my rent. And then obviously my council tax as well, my gas and electric. I had to use quite a bit of my savings. So I applied for discretionary housing payment, and they paid that for a few months. That ended in January, and that really helped.”

In a second interview around six months later, Izzy was nearing the end of her entitlement to statutory maternity pay and began conversations with her employer about returning to work. Izzy’s manager was supportive, and began coordinating with her employers HR department. However, Izzy struggled with external factors such as cost and availability of childcare and early-years education facilities, access to effective and affordable public transport. Her most significant concern was childcare:

“So basically I worked it out, all my wages will go to childcare. Everything I earn. Which... what would be the point in going back to work? If every single penny is going to go... go to that. ‘Cause roughly about £80 a day. So I think I’ll leave with like £1 really. So yeah. I mean, I’m not entirely sure that that, the thing starts for his age until next year. I think the September. So I’ll really need to look into it, ‘cause when I did contact the Universal Credit, they said that I’ll get help with it, but I need to research into it myself”

In order to receive social security support, Izzy had to update her online Universal Credit journal with any changes and attend appointments at the Jobcentre, with her baby. She found the experience very stressful, and worried about having to attend appointments with her young baby again:

“And the last time I went in, he was only a newborn. And he was in the pram, and he was crying, and it was kind of only the... one of the first few times that I’d kind of taken him out myself. And they were late with the appointment, and he was crying, and it was just... it got a bit much.”

Izzy noted that she had not received advice from the Jobcentre, but had support from a local welfare rights charity and her Health Visitor. However, she noted a difficult support transition when her Health Visits became less frequent:

“I only kind of see her once a month now. Like it’s, the visits have really cut... cut down”.

Izzy felt very lucky to have the support of nearby family, but as a single parent found it challenging to meet other parents and find local places to go with her baby. She noted an example of a local sensory class which her baby “got a lot from.” However, at £9 per class, she could not take him very often.

Human Rights Considerations

Child poverty is family poverty. When caregivers experience in-work poverty, their access to services and resources that are essential for them and their children to enjoy a life of dignity and human rights - money, food, housing, gas and electricity, access to extracurricular activities, sports and physical activity, access to education, the best possible physical and mental health - are all affected.

The human rights considerations of in-work poverty are reported in this research to be exacerbated in the hospitality sector due to a lack of flexibility, and financial and material support for working parents, and the unintended consequences on their children. Some of the challenges emerging from this research include:

Flexible working, childcare, and children's rights to development, education, and play

- Permanent zero-hours contracts, insecure hours, and reliance on overtime hours to pay for essentials in hospitality¹⁵ is particularly harmful on working parents' ability to provide for their children and creates challenges upholding children's rights to development, education, and play in the short-term, as well as concerns about longer-term child development outcomes.
- Early-childhood learning services and childcare are essential for peer-to-peer support amongst working parents and hold great benefits for children's development, learning and socialisation with their peers. Serving the Future research findings highlight a systemic lack of affordable, accessible, and flexible early years activities and out-of-school childcare provision available outside of traditional working hours, in both rural and urban areas.
- **Jackie** acknowledges the benefits of early-childhood learning for her child, through activities like sensory classes, but feels financially excluded. This exclusion affects her too, as these classes provide opportunities to meet and develop supportive relationships with other parents.
- **Izzy** shares concerns about the lack of nursery placements and resources in her area, which impacts her ability to work more hours for more pay and threatens her child's ability to benefit from those essential early-childhood learning and play facilities. This is best characterised through her highlighting that local baby sensory classes are unaffordable at £9 per class.

Welfare support through pregnancy and parenthood and the right to (benefit from) social security

- Inadequate access to financial and material assistance during pregnancy and parenthood, a lack of awareness about social security eligibility, and 'passported benefits' when earning slightly above the threshold are all significantly impacting parents in hospitality.¹⁶
- The right to access and maintain social security benefits plays an important role in reducing and alleviating poverty and social exclusion for all who live in circumstances which deprive them of the capacity to fully realise their human rights.¹⁷ Children specifically have a right to benefit from social security – that is financial and other support for children provided where the adult(s) in children's lives are unable to adequately provide for them.¹⁸
- **Jackie** outlines her experience of a wholly inaccessible welfare system, a concern for her family's right to social security. She receives confusing messages and insufficient information about available services and the eligibility criteria for both adult- and child-focused benefits. Despite her doctor suggesting she should receive Adult Disability Payment due to poor health; she is found to be ineligible. Help from charitable organisations has helped Jackie to offset some of her financial struggles, but her precarious position threatens her ability to keep providing for her child.

- **Kora** went 16 weeks with no income when she was made redundant whilst on maternity leave. The disproportionate length of time she and her family went without any income put them at real risk of extreme poverty or homelessness, which was thankfully avoided due to emergency support from family. In these extreme circumstances, Kora and her children have a right to social security and the use of all available resources to fulfil their rights. This was put at real risk by no state intervention during an unreasonably elongated period without access to essential resources.

Cost-of-living, food poverty and the right to an adequate standard of living

- Insufficient action to prevent further increases in cost-of-living is resulting in higher poverty figures, housing crises, and food, energy, and fuel poverty in families throughout Scotland.¹⁹ One of the most prolific concerns for children in this research is the right to an adequate supply and standard of food, i.e. nutrient-dense and balanced foods such as fruits and vegetables.
- The right to an adequate standard of living includes food, clothing and housing, and the continuous improvement of living conditions.²⁰ Parents and caregivers have primary responsibility to secure children's right to an adequate standard of living, on top of the responsibility of government to intervene where assistance is required.²¹
- **Izzy** is in receipt of social security assistance. However, rising food costs have resulted in her having limited access to the plentiful and nutritious food required for her child's health and development, and so she at times eats only one meal per day to provide enough for her child. Izzy faces the additional challenge of parenting whilst hungry, and protecting against any further worsening of her financial situation which would inhibit her right to an adequate standard of living and her child's rights to food, health, and development.
- Due to decreased wages and increasing prices, **Kora** and her partner also report limiting their food quantity and quality so that they can provide for their child. Kora's situation is further challenged by her rural location, due to factors such as increased fuel costs to reach larger, cheaper supermarkets which are further away and those in her area having less access to charitable assistance and foodbanks, for example.

Well-being, stress, worry and the right to physical and mental health

- The challenges facing families in in-work poverty are more than financial. This research highlights the substantial impact of in-work poverty on physical and mental health – particularly parents' work and money-related stress, worry, fatigue and restricted food intake.
- The right to health is an inclusive right which is intrinsically linked to family poverty. It includes access to physical and mental health care, but also the underlying determinants of health such as adequate nutrition and housing and healthy working conditions.²² For children, health includes these factors as well as all that is required to ensure children's survival and development.²³
- Jackie expresses that in-work poverty has seriously affected her mental health. Despite having access to a health visitor, support from charities, and counselling provision from a third sector organisation, Jackie highlights challenges in the quality of mental health support available, and the implications for when this support ends. Jackie worries that the end of these services poses a risk not only to her physical and mental health, but the subsequent impact this may have on her child.

Recommendations for Scotland's Policymakers

Under Scotland's new framework of child rights protection, the Scottish Government, local authorities, and public authorities are defined as duty bearers – entities or individuals with specific obligations or responsibilities to realise human rights and avoid rights violations. To systematically tackle child poverty and deliver children's human rights, this emerging research indicates that in particular, duty bearers should:

Ensure a sustained, long-term focus on investment in children. While an immediate response to child poverty is needed, short- and medium-term solutions alone will not be sufficient.

- Evidence is clear that investment in the wide range of family and community strengths to support children's well-being in the short- and medium-term has important value to children's development and outcomes. But these investments must also be seen - and their value evaluated - in the light of the longer-term benefits not only to children, but also their families, communities, society, and the economy as a whole.²⁴

Utilise all available resources and guidance to align children's human rights and child poverty policy initiatives and goals.

- **Tackling Child Poverty Plan:** Outlines the basis for a joint approach to support Scotland's ambitions on tackling child poverty and progressing equality and human rights and support of a Scottish strategy on a human rights approach to tackling poverty.
- **Child Rights Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA):** Ensure CRWIAs are carried out for all new and existing policies and practices which are, or may have a direct or indirect impact on children.
- **Child Rights Budgeting:** Consider children's rights in both the content and process of all appropriate budgets and the allocation of resources.
- **Participation:** Increase and meaningfully facilitate children's access to decision-making spaces - uphold their right to be heard and give due weight to their voices in all decision-making processes which affect children's lives.

Increase and up-scale community services, training and capacity building for frontline providers. Understanding and actively supporting families experiencing in-work poverty is vital.

- **Training and capacity building:** Practitioners across all public services play a vital role in ensuring children and families are treated with dignity and respect, and in a rights-nurturing environment. Direct service providers should be child-centred, sensitive to potential harms, and without stigma.
- **Community services:** Services like North Lanarkshire Council's [Prospects for Parents](#) offer a range of support including money, debt and childcare advice, access to funds – like the childcare development fund and discretionary fund – health interventions and access to training and work experience.

Equally, shorter-term measures can offer urgent and immediate support to mitigate worsening conditions and the cost-of-living for children and families living in poverty. Building on success stories across Scotland, practices should be implemented at scale, and in distinct ways that take into account the distinct needs of families in both urban and rural communities. Further recommended actions to support children include:

- **End hunger in schools:** Extend universal free school meal provision to all primary and secondary school pupils.

- Increase financial support to keep children from low-income households in education: Uplift Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for those in post-16 education, implement actions from Child Poverty Action Group's [Cost of the School Day](#) to relieve school-related financial pressures.
- Improve children's access to youth work services, including psychosocial and mental health support.

Learn more about *Serving the Future* and read our previous research at <https://www.servingthefuture.scot/>

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