



Children and Young People's  
Centre for Justice

# Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan 2026 - 2031

Response from the Children and Young  
People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ)

March 2025

**Collaborating for rights-respecting justice**  
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## Reporting Template

Building on our learning and evidence to date and following engagement with our External Reference Group, we have identified a number of key strategic themes which we would like to test, which are noted below:

- **Increasing earned incomes by supporting and providing opportunities for parents and carers, to enter, sustain and progress in work.** This includes through the likes of employability support and the provision of essential infrastructure such as childcare and transport.
- **Reducing the costs of living and maximising incomes from social security to allow families to live dignified lives and meet their basic needs.** This includes through the likes of social security, affordable homes, and advice services.
- **Delivering holistic and whole family support to improve outcomes and wellbeing and enable families to better engage with other services that directly increase their incomes.** This includes through action focused on preventing families falling into poverty and wider community-based support.
- **Supporting children and young people to reach their full potential and to break the cycle of poverty in the longer term.** This includes through the likes of early years support, education, and post-school transitions.

Across all of these themes we have also identified the need to retain a sharp focus on addressing the needs of the families at greatest risk of poverty, (including the six priority family groups identified: lone parent families; families with a disabled adult or child; larger families with three or more children; minority ethnic families; families with children under the age of one; and families with mothers under the age of 25) and to give consideration to other inequalities including the deeply gendered nature of child poverty and the challenges associated with living in rural areas.

**Annex A provides some links that may be useful in supporting your response.**

We would welcome your views on these themes and the cross-cutting focus on addressing the needs of families at greatest risk of poverty - in particular:

1. Do you think these are the right themes to focus on?

### CYCJ response

The Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) works towards ensuring that Scotland's approach to children and young people in conflict with the law is rights-respecting; contributing to better outcomes for our children, young people and communities.

Through our participatory work with children and young people, the research evidence we have generated and our policy and practice knowledge, we understand and recognise the strong

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impact of poverty on the likelihood of a child or young person coming into conflict with the law and being exposed to a myriad of adversities, and the impacts this can have on their ability to transition away from harmful behaviours.

We broadly welcome the key themes and the cross-cutting focus. The fourth theme, on supporting children and young people to reach their full potential, is particularly critical for those who have come into conflict with the law. There is a close connection between poverty as a key driver for, and a consequence of, children and young people coming into conflict with the law. The ground-breaking Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime, a longitudinal piece of research on over 4,000 young people, demonstrated conclusively that those who had committed the most serious of offences were also the most impoverished and vulnerable of the cohort of children in conflict of the law which they studied. It is also important to recognise the overrepresentation of children and young people with Speech, Language, Communication Needs (SLCN) in the justice system, with a connection between the greater the SLCN and the more serious the offence committed.

In a demographical study of children in secure care in Scotland in 2018, Gibson (2020) found far greater levels of poverty, in particular SIMD zones 1 and 2, amongst the background of children in secure care, than was reflected in the general population of under 18s in Scotland. Moreover, exposure to poverty was found to have a statistically significant effect on childhood adversities including Adverse Childhood Experiences.

Consequences of falling into poverty, such as being evicted, can be also particularly harmful for children and young people through the fracturing of positive relationships and the uncertainty created over the dismantling of structure and routine. As evidenced in the Mitchell, Burns, Glozier and Nielsson (2023) study on 'Homelessness and predictors of criminal reoffending', there is a clear link between housing insecurity and reoffending. Children in poverty, and those with experience of the care system, are also more at risk of child criminal exploitation (CCE). It is widely recognised that the behaviour of children and young people who come into conflict with the law is often a reaction to their circumstances and experiences (McAra & McVie, 2022; Vaswani, 2018; Lightowler, 2020).

The Edinburgh study also found that a criminal justice response can be counter-productive in terms of discouraging repeat offending, especially when it creates further harm. In particular, being detained in police custody for significant periods of time can create fear and confusion, alongside being a re-traumatising experience (Vaswani, et al 2024). More successful approaches to preventing recidivism for children and young people have been found through a strengths-based approach, with sustained positive relationships, fostering a sense of agency, building hope and developing social and human capital; all of which help create a 'non-offender' identity which can be vital in helping children and young people move away from offending (McNeill, 2006; Creaney et al, 2024).

In order to be an effective implement for tackling child poverty, therefore, it is vital that the opportunity to reach their full potential and break the cycle of poverty is universally available across all children and young people, regardless of their past actions This includes the

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continued provision of education opportunities throughout any period of offending and limiting the need for disclosure of past offences to future employers/ education providers to only where it is absolutely necessary.

We also welcome the focus on providing holistic and whole family support to improve outcomes and wellbeing. This is a key part of the Promise and fits into wider youth justice strategies and policies, such as Early and Effective Intervention and Reimagining Secure Care. Holistic family support is vital for early intervention and a preventative approach.

2. Are there other key strategic themes we should consider?

### CYCJ response

A core theme which needs to underpin all of this work, is the protection and realisation of the UNCRC for all children under 18, and human rights for all young people. Article 27 of the UNCRC calls on states to provide an adequate standard of living, yet currently approximately 24% of children across Scotland live in relative poverty. Moreover, the child's rights to good health (Article 24), to access to leisure and play (Article 31), and to education (Article 28) are all impacted through the corrosive effects of living in poverty. There is, therefore, a legal and moral obligation to address the heightened rates of poverty found in Scotland.

The tackling child poverty delivery plan must encompass all aspects of rights, including meaningful participation in decision making, the right to effective remedy for perceived violations, and with all decisions to be taken in the best interest of the child. We welcomed the inclusion in the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act of the Children's Rights Scheme and look forward to seeing its development. However, in our recent response to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment 27 consultation, we found the right to effective remedy wanting. CYCJ spoke to six young people (19-22) who had been in Polmont Young Offenders Institution since before they had turned 18. The group had a clear perception that their past harmful behaviour qualified their ability to exercise their rights and that being in custody served almost as a state of exception. The group identified access to information and education on rights, alongside enabling measures from people in positions of power to support children and young people in custody to feel empowered to exercise their rights, to be critically lacking from their experience.

Respecting the rights of children and young people, taking a strengths-based approach to foster hope, agency and build relationships, is vital to trying to breaking the cycle of poverty and offending behaviour for children and young people and this includes during their time spent in the care and justice systems.

As you think about each theme, noting the plan must set out measures for the purpose of meeting the 2030 child poverty targets, we would also be keen to hear your views on any or all of the following questions:

1. What is working well and what actions should Scottish Government and partners either continue to do or to do more of?

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## CYCJ response

In terms of enabling children and young people to realise their full potential, there has been considerable progress in recent years in creating a more rights-respecting, trauma-informed, multi-agency response to those who have come into conflict with the law. This includes the removal of all under 18s from Young Offender Institutions and the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots law, both in 2024. The focus within the Scottish Government's Youth Justice Vision (updated June 2024) to recognise each child's potential and provide them with the support they need to succeed is very welcome. CYCJ has worked with the Scottish Government and other key partners in shaping the Whole System Approach and this has made important strides in meeting the needs of young people involved in offending. This includes work on Early and Effective Intervention to ensure children and young people receive the support they need to prevent future reoffending.

There needs to be a greater roll out of this approach across all partners to ensure it becomes embedded across all care and justice systems. As set out in response to the next question, Scotland must end the over-criminalisation of children and young people, recognising the very damaging impact this can have on their wellbeing and the deep connections between this and child poverty and inequality. Alongside this, the delivery of the Promise will make a significant contribution to tackling child poverty.

Given the persistent levels of child poverty in Scotland, there is clearly more which can be done to both raise incomes and reduce costs, as highlighted by the End Child Poverty Scotland coalition. CYCJ supports the calls from the coalition for the Scottish Child Payment to be increased to at least £40 per week, with modelling from IPPR Scotland identifying that this would lift a further 20,000 children out of poverty than current projections. We would also support the call from the Poverty Alliance to extending free bus travel to all under 25s.

2. Are there policies, actions or approaches that the Scottish Government and/or partners should either stop or do differently?

## CYCJ response

To support children and young people to recognise their full potential, the Scottish Government and partners must end the overcriminalisation of children and young people and the deprivation of their liberty, unless deemed absolutely necessary. This includes ensuring all children are kept out of police custody and instead are delivered to an alternative place of safety when necessary. As outlined earlier, research from CYCJ has found that for children and young people, being detained in police custody can be the most traumatising part of their justice journey (Vaswani, et al 2024). There is a national, cross-agency commitment, including from Police Scotland, to finding alternatives to police custody and this must be given the attention it deserves. A very recent troubling report found that children as young as 13 continue to be held in police custody

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for long periods of time (HMICS, 2025). Finding trauma-informed alternatives to police custody, which are centred on fulfilling UNCRC, is a key part of Keeping the Promise and the evidence shows that avoiding unnecessary detention is in the best interests of the child and delivers the best outcomes

Alongside this, the next 10 years ought to see a change in the design, delivery, and experience of secure care for those small numbers of children who require to be there. The Reimagining Secure Care report (2024), written by CYCJ, calls for significant system changes to ensure Scotland's children are treated first and foremost as children, with a trauma-informed and rights-respecting approach. Developed using insights from young people, their families, and professionals, the report advocates for an integrated model of care centred on the needs of children and families. This vision is grounded in the belief that children should remain within their families wherever possible in order to deliver the best outcomes, including tackling child poverty.

Given the correlation between challenges at school, school exclusion and subsequent conflict with the law and experience of poverty, the Scottish Government ought to focus attention on reducing school exclusions as far as possible and to address the lack of attainment amongst some groups. The Edinburgh study and similar research points to the long-term impact that removal from the school environment can have upon children, through preventing the attainment of qualifications and consequently adding to their barriers to entering stable, well-paid employment. By investing in in-school resources that can sustain a child's enrolment and enhance learning, the Scottish Government can address the so called 'school-to-prison pipeline' that has been articulated within criminology literature and scholarship. Likewise, ensuring that schools are best equipped to support neurodivergent children and those who have additional learning barriers would go some way towards closing the attainment gaps currently found within Scotland's schools. This is particularly important given the overrepresentation of children and young people with speech, language, and communication needs in the care and justice systems.

3. Are there new policies, actions or approaches that Scottish Government should consider implementing?

### **CYCJ response**

A key hindrance to justice-experienced children and young people realising their full potential is the time they have spent detained and the barriers to education and employment they face through subsequently holding a criminal record. The Promise report (2020) contains a commitment for the minimum age of criminal responsibility (ACR) "to be brought in line with the most progressive global Governments" and this is an area which could deliver significant impact on the ability of children and young people. Following the passing of the Age of Criminal Responsibility (Scotland) Act 2019, an advisory group was established to assist Scottish

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ministers to review and consider any future age of criminal responsibility. The group published their report in December 2024 and concluded that the ACR be increased to at least 14 as soon as possible, and then to 16 in the near future.

4. How can Scottish Government and partners work differently to ensure seamless, integrated supported for families? What prevents this?

### CYCJ response

There needs to be a shift towards a more preventative agenda, and a shift away from the current overwhelming focus on 'failure demand'. The 2025 review by the Independent Working Group on Antisocial Behaviour identified the need to not view antisocial behaviour in isolation. Instead, it is vital to take a preventative approach to address key drivers, including poverty, housing instability, food insecurity, and gaps in services such as youth work and lack of mental health resources.

5. What more can we do to understand the challenges being faced by the family at greatest risk of poverty, including the six priority families identified to ensure their specific and interconnected needs are met?
6. What targeted action could be taken to tackle inequalities faced by marginalised groups, to help raise their incomes and improve their outcomes? This could include specialist support for one or more groups.
7. Please use this text box to enter anything else you feel is relevant that we may have missed, this may include any research, evaluation or findings from consultations that you have undertaken which are relevant to this call for evidence. You can attach any published reports, research on lived experience of poverty, or internal pieces of work you may hold along with your submission

In our response we have referred to a number of sources, which we have listed below.

Age of Criminal Responsibility Advisory Group. (2024). [The Report from the Age of Criminal Responsibility Advisory Group on the review of the Age of Criminal Responsibility \(Scotland\) Act 2019](#).

Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (2024). [Reimagining Secure Care](#).

Creaney, S. Burns, S. Douglas, A-M. Brierley, A. Falconer, C. (2024), [Desistance Through Participatory Practice: involving children in decision making processes in youth justice](#). Policy Press.

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- Gibson, R. (2020). [ACEs, Places and Status: Results from the 2018 Scottish Secure Care Census](#). Children and Young People's Centre for Justice. University of Strathclyde.
- HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland. (2025) [Custody Inspection Report - Greater Glasgow](#).
- Independent Care Review. (2020) [The Promise – Youth Justice](#)
- Independent Working Group on Antisocial Behaviour. (2025) [Antisocial Behaviour - Whose responsibility? Towards a more effective response to antisocial behaviour in Scotland](#). Scottish Government.
- McAra, L., & McVie, S. (2022). [Causes and Impact of Offending and Criminal Justice Pathways: Follow-up of the Edinburgh Study Cohort at Age 35](#). University of Edinburgh.
- McNeill F (2006) [A desistance paradigm for offender management](#), *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 6(1), 39-62.
- Mitchell, R., Burns, N., Glozier, N., and Nielsson, O. (2023). [Homelessness and predictors of criminal reoffending](#). *CBMH* 33(4), 261-275.
- Vaswani, N., Moodie, K., and McEwan, D. (2024) [Children's Experiences of Police Custody and the Implications for Trauma-Informed Policing](#). *Youth Justice* 1-18

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## BACKGROUND MATERIAL

### LEGISLATION

- [Child Poverty \(Scotland\) Act 2017](#) set out statutory requirements for delivery plans, engagement and consultation, and meeting four income-based targets

### DELIVERY PLANS, ANNUAL REPORTS AND LOCAL REPORTING

- [Best Start, Bright Futures, the second tackling child poverty delivery plan](#) covers the period 2022-26.
- Scottish Ministers report annually on progress against targets and in implementing delivery plans. The most recent report was published in June 2023: [Tackling child poverty delivery plan: progress report 2022 to 2023 - gov.scot](#).
- Local authorities and Health Boards are required to jointly produce annual Local Child Poverty Action Reports. These set out action taken and planned to contribute to meeting the targets. You can access them here: [Local Child Poverty Action Reports | Improvement Service](#)

### DATA & EVIDENCE

- Poverty & income equality data - [Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2020-23](#)
- An evidence overview on the six family priority types: [In-work poverty amongst priority family types - Tackling child poverty priority families overview - gov.scot](#)
- [Tackling child poverty - progress report 2023-2024: annex B - focus report on other marginalised groups at risk of poverty - gov.scot](#)
- [Tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022-2026 - annex 6: what works - evidence review - gov.scot](#)

The [Tackling child poverty - place-based, system change initiatives: learnings - gov.scot](#) report provides early evidence and learning from a range of initiatives that aim to tackle child poverty through working in partnership to provide holistic, person-centred support for parents and families.

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