

MAKE CHILDHOOD UNSTOPPABLE: PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT



Scotland has shown significant leadership on children's rights, from taking the groundbreaking step of directly incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law, to embedding children's rights in schools and health services, and supporting children's rights around the world. When children's rights are upheld, childhood is unstoppable. Babies get the best start in life, children grow up healthy, happy and safe, families can thrive, and our whole society benefits.

But progress has been uneven, and too many children are still being denied their rights. In Scotland, child poverty rates remain high. Almost one in four children are growing up in poverty – nearly a third of those in very deep poverty¹ – leading to negative impacts that can last a lifetime. Globally, declining aid spending and the escalating impacts of conflict, poverty and climate change affect children first and most acutely. This means fewer children attending school, receiving life-saving food or accessing critical healthcare services.

This year, a new Scottish Government will have the opportunity to make rights a reality for **all** children, in Scotland and around the world.

The UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) calls on all political parties in Scotland to commit to three priorities:

1. Embed children's rights at the heart of government and communities.

2. Invest in early childhood and tackle child poverty in Scotland.

3. Put children first in Scotland's international development work.

Priority 1: Embed children's rights at the heart of government and communities.

The UNCRC is the most widely ratified international human rights treaty in history, setting out rights that ensure every child can have a good childhood and develop to their full potential. Scotland has taken the groundbreaking step of directly incorporating the UNCRC into Scots law through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024.

The Scottish Government must continue to be ambitious in its aspirations for children by maximising the impact of the 2024 Act and embedding rights-based practice across government and communities throughout Scotland.

UNICEF UK urges the next Scottish Government to:

- Ensure the full and consistent implementation of the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024, giving meaningful consideration to children's views in all relevant proposed laws, policies and decisions, with clear accountability if rights are not upheld.
- Expand the reach of the UNCRC Act by ensuring that all existing and future legislation in devolved areas that affect children in Scotland falls within its scope.
- Act on outstanding recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as set out in its 2023 Concluding Observations.
- Strengthen a rights-based approach across early childhood support and services, drawing on established, evidence-based frameworks operating at scale to embed children's rights in practice in communities across Scotland.

Priority 2: Invest in early childhood and tackle child poverty in Scotland.

Early childhood is the period in which foundations are laid for future health, educational attainment and life chances. It's also when action to tackle child poverty has the greatest potential to prevent harm and early inequalities from becoming entrenched throughout life.

The first years of a child's life should be a time of security, nurture and care, yet for too many families they are shaped by financial stress, insecurity and unmet need.

In Scotland, 35% of families with a baby under one are living in poverty.²

Research links early poverty with persistent health inequalities that begin at birth and continue throughout life,³ and shows that by 27-30 months, children in the most deprived areas of Scotland are more than twice as likely to be identified with developmental concerns compared to children of the same age in the most affluent communities.⁴

Child poverty is a children's rights issue and intersects with a range of rights from the moment children are born. Prioritising early childhood in efforts to eradicate child poverty is one of the most transformative actions the Scottish Government can take to improve wellbeing and outcomes for children today and generations to come.

UNICEF UK urges the next Scottish Government to:

- Commit to meeting the child poverty reduction targets by 2030.
- Take a rights-based, cross-government approach to supporting and investing in early childhood. This should include:
 - Strengthening financial support for families with babies and young children.
 - Increasing the Scottish Child Payment to at least £40 per week for all eligible families.
 - Increasing uptake of the Best Start Grant Pregnancy and Baby Payment among priority families.

- Increasing the rate of Best Start Foods at least by inflation each year.
- Extending access for families with no recourse to public funds to all Best Start payments.
- Ensuring families with babies and young children can easily access integrated and high-quality early childhood support and services in their local area.
 - Prioritising the highest need areas in the first instance, and offering support across health, mental health, education, childcare, social security and employment.
 - Learning from existing place-based early years models – including family hub approaches in Scotland and across the UK – to inform the development and roll-out of support for all families from pre-birth through the first years of life.
- Enhancing the accessibility and affordability of high-quality early learning and childcare.
 - Understanding current barriers to accessing funded childcare provision for eligible 2-year-olds and proactively increasing take up among priority families.
 - Progressively move toward a universal system that gives all children equal access to government-funded childcare, starting with a universal offer for 2-year-olds.
 - Working with Local Authorities to evaluate existing ‘Early Adopter’ pilots through a child-rights lens, applying findings to future policy decisions.
 - Investing in the Early Learning and Childcare workforce to enable high-quality, rights-based education and care through long-term workforce planning, with cross-government targets to strengthen recruitment, retention and fair work.
- Strengthen the quality and sufficiency of data on child poverty in Scotland to enable evidence-led policy formation and progress assessment. This should include:
 - Strengthening the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) dataset for Scotland by working with the UK Government to improve the response rate to the Family Resources Survey.
 - Facilitating greater data transparency and sharing with Scotland’s public authorities and civil society organisations.

Priority 3: Put children first in Scotland's international development work.

Every child, no matter where they are born, has the same rights to survive, be healthy and to learn. Yet in contexts shaped by extreme poverty, climate change and conflict, children are disproportionately affected, facing heightened risks to their survival, health and development.

These pressures are now reversing hard-won progress – 2025 marked the first year this century when child deaths increased globally.⁵

Scotland's international development work makes an important contribution to protecting children's rights in its partner countries and supporting progress towards the Sustainable

Development Goals. At a time when the situation for children globally is deteriorating, Scotland must not step back from children and their rights.

UNICEF UK urges the next Scottish Government to:

- Maintain Scotland’s International Development Fund – with annual increases at least in line with inflation – and apply a child-rights-based lens to international development decision-making aligned with the UNCRC.
- Protect the distinct role of Scotland’s Humanitarian Emergency Fund within the international development budget, ensuring it remains a rapid, needs-based mechanism operating in line with humanitarian principles and best practice.

To find out more, please contact:

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References

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2. Scottish Government (2025a) [Tackling child poverty priority families overview](#)
3. Scottish Government (2025b) [Health outcomes of experiencing poverty in the early years](#)
4. Nesta (2025) [Inequality and early child development in Scotland - three insights from the data](#)
5. Gates Foundation (2025) [2025 Goalkeepers Report](#)