

Evidence of families' needs

Even before the current coronavirus crisis nearly one in four, 230,000, of Scotland's children were growing up in the grip of poverty. Since March, we have seen thousands of children and their families across Scotland pulled into deeper levels of poverty and financial hardship due to the coronavirus outbreak. Families are already at breaking point and risk being pushed further into poverty. Some families are particularly affected by the crisis as they face multiple disadvantages - those priority families identified in the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan "Every Child Every Chance" - lone parents, families with a disabled adult or child, young mothers, minority ethnic families, families with a child under 1, and larger families.

Many of these households are dependent on Universal Credit (UC) and struggle with delayed first payments and a cluster of design and delivery problems. Universal Credit claims in Scotland have increased during the pandemic to more than five times the average amount in 2019.¹ Even with the new single adult rate of around £94 per week many families will still experience hardship. For example, an out of work family with two children will still be 20 per cent below the poverty line, despite the recent uplift in the value of universal credit.¹

There is a growing evidence base on how the current crisis is impacting the needs of families. This briefing sets out what we've heard so far from families, communities and partners on the immediate impacts.

This information points to the need for a national response to protect low income families now, and ensure we are on track to meeting the child poverty targets in 2030. We particularly believe a substantive additional payment or combination of payments should be delivered to low-income families to help them stay afloat.

Demand on hardship funds

Across the country more families than ever are presenting to services or requesting help from funds due to financial pressures, with those families who previously had been just about managing now being pulled into poverty.

We welcome the significant financial support provided by Scottish Government in response to the crisis, including the increased investment in the Scottish Welfare Fund and the establishment of the Wellbeing Fund. However, we know that organisations are now having to provide grants from their own funds to meet escalating demand. This highlights the need for additional financial support to be provided to families in poverty.

- Aberlour has invested and fundraised heavily to increase the size of its Urgent Assistance Fund – in response to the coronavirus more than £250,000 has been made available. The Fund has been a lifeline **providing hundreds of grants to families** across Scotland, including many not supported by Aberlour.
- Applications to the Urgent Assistance Fund have **increased by more than 1400% since March**, for families or young people under 21 seeking assistance with basic and essential household items, such as white goods, beds, bedding and children's clothes.
- Funding was exhausted on 21 April (end of week two of the six-week period) for Action for Children's Finance, Food and Welfare support, with **outstanding requests**

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/additional-110-000-universal-credit-claims-since-coronavirus-outbreak/>

equating to £77,830. A temporary hold has been placed on all new requests and solutions are being looked at to address unmet need, including through use of Action for Children's own Voluntary Income and Emergency Fund. However, this will be insufficient to fulfil all requests.

- Higher levels of funding are needed by priority families with critical needs and higher numbers of dependent children. **The majority of families and young people require six weeks of funding and support from Action for Children.**
- A number of organisations are also reporting that families are increasingly **reliant on cash support from friends and family.**

Increase in food insecurity

Levels of food insecurity across Scotland were already high, but the current crisis is exacerbating that situation yet further. Lockdown has meant families are spending far more time in the home and needing to provide extra meals for their children while also seeing their incomes cut. Low income families are particularly limited in their ability to bulk buy food with cheaper options often unavailable. There are few things more important than ensuring children and their parents are fed, yet we are hearing of families not being able to afford the food items they need.

- Aberlour has reported a rise in families unable to pay for food with an increase in demand for food vouchers, food packages, basic shopping and hot meals. **Over 90% of applications to the Urgent Assistance Fund have requested assistance with the provision of food**, including requests for funding to supply cookers, microwaves and other white goods for storing food, as well as funds to buy food.
- Since lockdown began, Aberlour's services have provided food packages, shopping and hot meals to **more than 3000 children, young people and parents not previously supported by our services.**
- In the first month of lockdown alone, One Parent Families Scotland **delivered 1,452 food parcels** to families.
- Rapidly increasing demand has been placed on food banks, with one reporting to the Poverty Alliance that there has been a **300% increase in demand in recent weeks.**
- The Poverty Alliance has heard from its Community Activist Advisory Group about the challenges caused **by inconsistencies in local authority approaches to supporting families on free school meals.** Whilst most local authorities are providing cash payments, vouchers or direct food provision in other areas limit the choices for recipients and in some cases families are simply unable to access the support. There is also concern about **what support will be in place over the summer holidays.**

Case study: *"Having the kids in the house all the time means we need to eat more, given that I can't tell them that everything will be alright keeping food on the table is a way of making them and me feel okay but we are finding it hard to buy food, it costs more now and also we are using more heating, we aren't just about managing now, we are struggling. It's a real worry for us but we are thankful Action for Children came to us with that help."*

Case study: *"Whilst we live close to 1 of these schools I do not feel comfortable taking my child there every day to collect a lunch for her given the restrictions. I have an underlying health condition and whilst I don't need to self-isolate I need to minimise our time outside of the home as much as possible. [...] It is also demeaning, living in a small town and people would know that my daughter is entitled to FSM which I wouldn't want."*

Difficulties paying for utilities

Prolonged periods of time at home has also meant utility bills rising considerably. Around a quarter of households in Scotland are already in fuel poverty, so this could hit those families harder and plunge even more households into hardship.

- We are aware of an increase in families struggling to pay for utility bills, including gas, heating and electricity.
- Aberlour's family support services have been working alongside a wide range of community partners to **deliver electricity and power cards**.
- One Parent Families Scotland's Energy Grants Fund **received 2000 enquiries and applications within a week of opening and the £100,000 fund has had to close** to new applications whilst further funding is sought.

Case study: "When applications opened to the Wellbeing Fund, Naomi submitted a bid for a family in order to cover the cost of utility bills, to stop them using the more expensive emergency settings, as well as to cover fuel to get into town and supermarket vouchers in order to shop. Money has now given the family six weeks of funding to purchase food, cover bills and fuel to travel. This has eased the worries of both Gordon and Zoe and has given him more time and energies to focus on spending time with his daughter during lockdown."

Digital exclusion

The current crisis has shone a light on the stark digital divide experienced by many low-income families. The lack of devices and internet access impacts children's learning, staying in touch with others, and a household's ability to claim and access Universal Credit.

- Save the Children has heard through referral partners that families urgently need access to technology and topping up mobile phone data.
- Aberlour is aware of families experiencing digital exclusion, which is adversely impacting on children's attainment and wider social and community connections. Digital access is also key for keeping families connected to services and support networks, and ensuring services continue to have sight of children where they might be child protection concerns. They have **provided digital devices, data packages and access to technology** for families unable to afford it.
- Action for Children is **equipping vulnerable families and young people with equipment for digital connectivity** and virtual support. This will enable staff to maintain contact and service continuity at this critical time.
- One Parent Families Scotland has set up a **digital fund of £25,000 to support digitally excluded single parents**. The majority of parents that OPFS support don't have laptops or PCs and are only able to access the internet via their phones. A lot of parents have requested help with broadband and digital devices to support their children's learning at home.

Case study: "Jane applied to the capitol fund part of the Wellbeing Fund in order to get a laptop for Stefanie and was successful with the bid which will allow her to continue her studies and complete her college course with the hope of then being able to go to university later in 2020.

Stefanie said: "Without the help from Action for Children again, I don't know if I would still be sticking with learning. The laptop is a real game changer for me, yes it will help with my

studies, but it will also keep me better connected with Jane and other friends I have made at college.”

Impact on wellbeing

We know that poverty and inequality has an impact on parents’ and children’s wellbeing, causing stress, anxiety and poor mental health. The stress and anxiety experienced by many low-income households has been compounded by social distancing measures.

- Save the Children has heard through referral partners that some of the **most significant challenges facing families include isolation, loneliness and mental health issues.**
- Aberlour has seen an **increase in requests for perinatal support linked to financial stress and anxiety and an overall increase in parental mental health concerns.** There have also been emerging child wellbeing concerns exacerbated by the financial impact of coronavirus.
- Action for Children has consulted with key local authorities and heard that there are **escalating emotional health and wellbeing issues, including more complex mental health problems** such as anxiety, depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation.
- One Parent Families Scotland has highlighted that even before the crisis, research from Caledonian University found that **84% of single parents reported being lonely.** The challenge of **being both sole carer and breadwinner will have been magnified by the impact of the present crisis,** impacting parents’ and children’s mental health and wellbeing. **In the first four weeks of lockdown, OPFS has seen a 240% rise in calls to the lone parent helpline, with many parents reporting an increase in stress and anxiety about their financial situation and coping during this crisis.**

Case study: “I’ve worked since I was 18 but have lost my job and my three kids are stuck with me at home. I can’t believe how hard it is to get help. To claim Universal Credit is really difficult and they can’t say when I’ll even get a payment. It’s really desperate and how I’ll cope I really don’t know...”

Case study: “My granddaughter has come to live with me as her mum has had a breakdown, but I’ve no bed, no clothes for her, running out of money for food and fuel. I really don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t called One Parent Families Scotland. Even now I don’t know what the future holds.”

Organisations

Aberlour
Action for Children
Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland
One Parent Families Scotland
Poverty Alliance
Save the Children