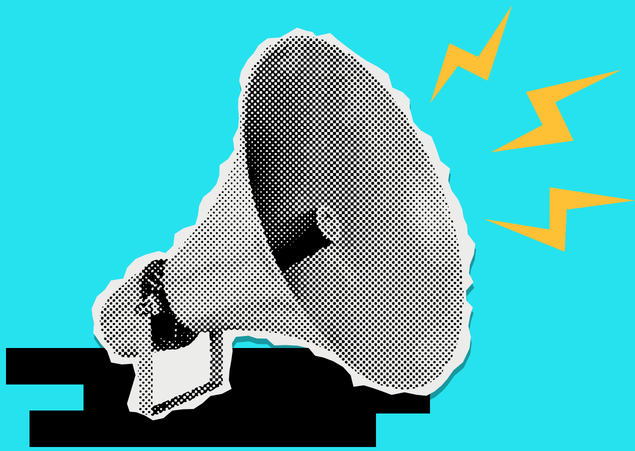
Scottish Anti Poverty Review

the POVERTY ALLIANCE

EDITION 44 | SPRING 2026



Progress and Perseverance:

Securing a Minimum Income in Scotland

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EDITORIAL TEAM

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The Poverty Alliance

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in the Scottish Anti-Poverty Review do not necessarily reflect those of The Poverty Alliance.

ABOUT THE POVERTY ALLIANCE

The Poverty Alliance exists to combat poverty in Scotland by working with people and communities to affect change. We act as the national anti-poverty network in Scotland, engaging with voluntary organisations, policy makers and politicians. Our vision is of a sustainable Scotland free of poverty, with dignity and social and economic justice for all.

We will tackle poverty by working with individuals, organisations and communities to affect change in the distribution of power and resources. To do this, we will:

- support the development of policies and practices which promote social justice and combat poverty
- work with people and communities experiencing poverty to help them challenge poverty
- build a strong anti-poverty network in Scotland
- raise awareness and change

attitudes about poverty

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Editorial

Progress and Perseverance: Securing a Minimum Income in Scotland

Peter Kelly, Chief Executive, The Poverty Alliance

Parliamentary terms can be useful ways of framing time periods to analyse what has changed, what has been achieved and, importantly, what has not. Although anyone who is involved in activity to bring about social change knows that the roots of any idea almost always lie further in the past. Those of us who have rallied around the idea of a Minimum Income Guarantee – an income below which no one would be allowed to fall - in recent years know that whilst the idea seems novel and new, it is one that draws on long and rich traditions of anti-poverty advocacy, analysis and action. As we reflect on the progress has been made in recent years, it is important to have a perspective on how our current ideas for change have developed in the past, and how they may develop in the future. The path to change rarely straightforward.

For the Poverty Alliance, the notion of an adequate income has always been central to our work. Whether we have been focused on our social security system, the problems of low paid employment, the ability of people to heat their homes or the barriers that prevent children from fully accessing education, the need for an adequate income that allows us to participate in society has always been part of our considerations. An adequate income has always been an essential pillar of anti-poverty policy – it is the basis of how we secure dignity for every individual, and ensuring everyone has an adequate income would be a clear marker of a compassionate society.

As the late Professor John Viet Wilson, the renowned researcher, thinker on poverty and co-founder of CPAG, once noted 'adequate incomes are the clean water of anti-poverty policy'. Adequate incomes in this sense are as fundamental to human development as clean water is to human health. John's research on how Governments set rates for social assistance, particularly his book Setting Adequacy Standardsi in 1998, paved the way for later work on the Minimum Income Standard, which has proved so important to current campaigning and development on the Minimum Income Guarantee.

The Minimum Income Standard (MIS) was first published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2008, and has continued to be updated on a regular basis by researchers at Loughborough University.

It is based on what people actually need to live, constructing what are known as 'consensual budgets', identifying a minimum that is about more than just food and shelter, but one that allows people choice and the ability to participate in society. The MIS has since been used in a variety of ways, including as the basis for setting the real Living Wage and to assessing levels of rural fuel poverty in Scotland.

All of this research, policy advocacy and campaigning led the way to the call for a Minimum Income Guarantee in Scotland. As the Covid pandemic struck in 2020 one of its many consequences was the exposure of the fragility of our society, the precariousness of jobs for many people and the threadbare nature of our social security provision. At a time of the greatest uncertainty, when all of us needed security, the systems that were intended to support us were exposed as simply being not up to the job.

The Social Renewal Advisory Board was set up in 2020 by the Scottish Government to consider how we in Scotland could learn the lessons of the social impact of the pandemic. They asked how we could provide that security and dignity that was exposed during the pandemic and that was the day-to-day reality for millions across the UK. Not surprisingly, they picked up on the ideas that were around at the time. Organisations such as IPPR Scotland and the New Economics Foundation has been promoting the idea of a comprehensive Minimum Income Guarantee and it found its way into the report of the Board, If not Now, When?, becoming its first call to action.

Campaigners, including the Poverty Alliance, made the Guarantee a key call going into the 2021 Scottish elections, and saw that call reflected in the manifestos of the SNP, Scottish Labour Party and Scottish Greens. As a result, the Scottish Government's Programme for Government in 2021 included a commitment to begin to explore the how a Guarantee could be developed and implemented in Scotland.

In our work on the Guarantee we have often referred to it as a simple but transformative idea. The last five years have been spent unpacking that simple idea, highlighting the challenges and complexities that are inherent in actually delivering a Guarantee. The Scottish Government gave that task to an Independent Expert Group of representatives from across civil society, including the Poverty Alliance. Chaired by Russell Gunson of the Robertson Trust, the group delivered their report in June 2025.iv

The report reinforces and clarifies the idea of the Guarantee. It highlights that the Guarantee is not simply a social security payment, but that it is rooted in reform to services, access to fair work, as well as investment in social security. Central to the recommendations in the report of the Expert Group has been the notion of a roadmap over the next 10 years. There will be no 'big bang' moment when a Guarantee is introduced in Scotland, there is no switch that can be flicked to bring it to life. Rather there is a range of increasingly bold steps that will be needed to move towards the Guarantee.

Whilst the work of the Expert Group was taking place throughout the last Parliamentary term the Poverty Alliance has been working hard to build up support for the Minimum Income Guarantee in civil society. Our conference in 2023 was the first major public discussion of the Guarantee, and played a key role in starting to address some of the challenging questions associated with the idea. This event allowed us to look at what the Guarantee could mean for health inequalities, for people in the asylum process, how it could contribute to addressing gender equality, the role of fair work.

Since then we have continued the conversations across Scotland holding discussion events in Glasgow, Dundee, Stirling, Edinburgh all looking at different aspects of the implementation of the Guarantee from the powers needed, to the impact on carers and disabled people.v These discussions have shown the fundamental importance and need to build an active and informed constituency of individuals and organisations that understand what the Guarantee could mean.

All of this activity over the last five years has built up a new understanding of what a Guarantee could deliver for Scotland. But there remains a significant gap between the hopes and ambitions of anti-poverty campaigners and the commitments that are being made by politicians. As campaigners our next task continue to build support across civil society, but to persuade politicians of the need and feasibility of the Guarantee.

The initial steps in the roadmap relate to 'Building the Guarantee' over the next five years. This means putting in place some of the fundamentals where we move towards creating a fairer Scotland over the next 10 years. Some of these are most effectively delivered by the UK, for example scrapping the unjust five week wait for Universal Credit, or limits within UC for childcare costs. Others are more directly in the control of the Scottish Parliament, most notably the necessary increase to the Scottish Child Payment.

In his foreword to the Expert Group's report Russell Gunson answers the question of whether the Guarantee 'will happen' by saying that it 'is up to you'. He is, of course, right. The Guarantee at its fullest extent will mean some fundamental reworking of what we value as a society. It requires a different approach to what we value and what we invest in. Over the last five years we've seen that there is a need and a desire for that new approach. Over the next five years we will need to fight harder than ever to make that new approach a reality. The Poverty Alliance will be part of that fight and we hope you will join us.

A Moment of Choice for Scotland

Chloe Bukata, Communications and Engagement Lead, Wellbeing Economy Alliance Scotland

Election debates often get caught up with individual policies or short-term fixes. We must think - and act - bigger, opening up conversations about the kind of economy Scotland wants to build, and who that economy is designed to serve. At its heart, poverty is not just a social issue to be managed at the margins. It is a signal that the economy is failing to deliver security, dignity, and opportunity for everyone.

At WEAll Scotland, we work with civil society, policymakers, and communities to advance the idea of a Wellbeing Economy, one that puts people's wellbeing and the health of our environment at the centre of economic decision-making. From this perspective, reducing poverty is not separate from economic success. It is one of the clearest tests of whether Scotland's economy is truly working for people.

What the Last Parliament Taught Us About Poverty and the Economy

The last Scottish Parliamentary term has not been without progress. There is now a far wider recognition that economic growth, measured narrowly through GDP, does not automatically lead to reduced poverty or improved wellbeing. Language around wellbeing, prevention, and long-term outcomes has become more common in government strategies and policy debates. There has also been stronger collaboration across sectors, with greater emphasis on listening to lived experience and working alongside communities affected by poverty.

Despite this growing understanding, poverty remains stubbornly high. Too many people continue to experience in-work poverty, insecure housing, and reliance on crisis support. Too often, poverty is still treated as a downstream problem, something to be addressed after economic decisions have already been made, rather than as a predictable outcome of how our economy is structured. Economic decisions from infrastructure to investment are still frequently disconnected from their social outcomes. As a result, policies that aim to reduce poverty are often asked to compensate for wider economic choices that actively undermine them. The lesson from the last Parliament is clear: we understand the problem better than we did before, but understanding alone has not delivered the scale of change required.

A Wellbeing Economy: What It Means for Poverty Reduction

At its core, a Wellbeing Economy is about changing the conditions that drive poverty, rather than continually responding to its consequences.

Income security is central. Fair work, decent pay, predictable hours, and access to secure employment are fundamental to reducing poverty. An economy that relies on low-paid, insecure work will continue to produce poverty, no matter how strong the safety net around it.
A Wellbeing Economy bakes in predistribution, making sure the design of the economy ensures fair opportunities and outcomes from the start, rather than relying on redistribution mechanisms once inequalities have occurred.

The cost of living is equally critical. Housing, energy and childcare costs shape whether income is enough to live on. A Wellbeing Economy asks whether these essentials are affordable, accessible, and designed with public good in mind, or whether they are pushing people further into hardship and furthering inequality by boosting profits for the already-wealthy..

Public services play a vital role, not only in responding to crises but in preventing them. Services designed around dignity, access, and early intervention can reduce long-term demand while improving people's quality of life. When services are overstretched and reactive, poverty becomes harder to escape.

Power and voice also matter. People with lived experience of poverty are experts in the systems that shape their lives. A Wellbeing Economy creates space for that expertise to influence decisions, not as an afterthought but as a core part of policy design.

Finally, place matters. Poverty is experienced differently across Scotland, shaped by geography, infrastructure, and local opportunity. Addressing these inequalities requires place-based approaches that recognise the strengths and challenges of communities themselves.

What the Next Scottish Parliament Must Do Differently
The next Scottish Parliament does not need an endless list of new initiatives. It needs clarity of purpose, and the courage to act on what is already known to make a difference.

First, poverty reduction must be treated as an economic priority, not just a social one. Major economic decisions should be assessed for their impact on poverty and inequality, rather than assuming benefits will trickle through. Economic development policy must be aligned with social outcomes, so that economic strategies actively support income security, affordable living costs, and resilient communities.

Second, Scotland must continue to shift from crisis response to prevention. Too much public spending is still directed at managing the consequences of poverty rather than reducing the conditions that create it. Investing earlier, even when benefits fall beyond electoral cycles, can reduce long-term demand on crisis services and improve lives. This also means trusting and resourcing local, community-led solutions, which are often best placed to prevent hardship before it escalates.

Third, wellbeing needs to be embedded in how decisions are made, not confined to strategy documents or rhetoric. Scotland already has National Outcomes and wellbeing indicators; the challenge is to use them consistently to guide priorities and decision making. Stronger accountability for long-term impacts, including on poverty and inequality, is essential.

Finally, the next Parliament must share power and listen differently. Meaningful participation by people with lived experience of poverty should be standard practice, not an exception. Long-term partnerships with anti-poverty organisations can help ensure policies remain grounded in lived reality and responsive to change.

The challenge is not a lack of ideas, it is whether there is sufficient political courage to act on them.

From Principles to Practice: A Manifesto for a Wellbeing Economy

At WEAll Scotland, our contribution to this debate is grounded in values and in practical proposals for change. Ahead of the election, we have published our Manifesto for a Wellbeing Economy, developed with members and partners across civil society. It sets out a focused set of actions, ambitious, but deliverable within the powers of the Scottish Parliament, that respond directly to the conditions driving poverty in Scotland.

The manifesto is structured around five core needs for a Wellbeing Economy: dignity, fairness, nature, purpose and participation. These priorities provide a clear lens for translating wellbeing ambitions into concrete economic action.

At its core is a commitment to dignity, the principle that everyone in Scotland should have enough to live well, free from poverty, debt and destitution. This includes support for the progressive implementation of a Minimum Income Guarantee, alongside fair work, strong public services and a social security system that provides genuine protection against hardship.

The manifesto also addresses fairness, recognising that poverty cannot be separated from extreme inequalities in income, wealth and power. It calls for scaling up community wealth building and inclusive, democratic business models so that the wealth created in Scotland is retained locally and shared more equitably, particularly in sectors providing essential goods and services such as housing, care, energy and transport.

Crucially, it links poverty reduction with participation and power. People must have a meaningful say in the economic decisions that shape their lives, and rebuilding trust requires sustained investment in community infrastructure, local democracy and inclusive decision-making. Without this, even well-intentioned policies risk missing the realities of lived experience.

The manifesto also situates poverty within a wider ecological context, recognising that environmental breakdown and climate impacts disproportionately affect people experiencing poverty. A just transition is not an optional extra, but a core part of securing long-term wellbeing. Protecting nature and reducing inequality are not competing priorities, they are mutually reinforcing.

Taken together, the manifesto offers a clear message to political parties: tackling poverty requires an economy designed, from the outset, to meet people's needs, reduce inequality, and sustain wellbeing now and into the future.

A Call to Political Parties

Political parties across Scotland have made strong commitments to tackling poverty, and many of these reflect genuine concern and ambition. As the election approaches, there is an opportunity to move beyond shared intent and demonstrate how those commitments will be delivered in practice.

That will require honesty about trade-offs and limits, and a willingness to prioritise long-term outcomes over short-term fixes. It also means measuring success not simply through spending or policy outputs, but through lived outcomes: whether people feel more secure, more supported, and better able to thrive.

No single party can address poverty alone. Progress will depend on collaboration across parties, sectors and communities, and on a shared understanding that reducing poverty is not a marginal issue, it is central to Scotland's future prosperity and wellbeing.

Building an Economy That Works for Everyone

Poverty is not inevitable. It is shaped by choices, about what we value, how we measure success, and who we listen to. A Wellbeing Economy offers a practical, values-based approach to making different choices, putting people and planet at the centre of economic life.
At WEAll Scotland, we stand ready to work alongside political parties, policymakers, and anti-poverty organisations to help turn ambition into action. The next Scottish Parliament has an opportunity not just to manage poverty, but to reshape the economy so fewer people experience it at all.

Next MSPs can do better for disabled people

Tressa Burke and Karen Wylie, Glasgow Disability Alliance

In co-designing the DEP, three priorities were identified for its initial stage: 1. providing financial support for disabled households; 2. supporting disabled people's full inclusion and participation in their lives, communities, and Scotland; 3. improving Mental Health. Whatever the make-up of the next Parliament, it must maintain momentum in realising the aims of, and maximising resources for, this vital Plan.

Actions Needed by the Next Parliament

1. Make Ends Meet for Disabled People

In 2025 Glasgow Disability Alliance (GDA) conducted a Member Survey, which received 756 responses.[1] It asked what benefits respondents were in receipt of and, for those on disability benefits, whether these covered the true additional costs of being disabled: 82% said they did not. Contrary to their intended purpose, GDA hears constantly from members that they use their disability benefits to cover everyday essentials, not to meet these additional costs. Because it costs more to be disabled, it's only right that disabled people are at the heart of efforts to address poverty. Including by:

- Ensuring adequate benefits levels via Social Security Scotland: increase levels of devolved non-means tested disability benefits and mitigate any shortfalls resulting from UK Government changes
- Improving welfare rights practice, information and advice, respecting the role of third party representatives.
- Establishing schemes to provide disabled people with affordable utilities, including cash support for those using dialysis and other independent living equipment.
- Maintaining momentum and investment in the Disability Equality Plan, including establishing accountability and governance mechanisms co-designed with and involving Disabled People's Organisations.
- Piloting a Minimum Income Guarantee – a level beneath which no-one falls – that includes a robust disability premium.
- Making our tax system fairer, using the tax levers available within devolution including a radical reform of Council Tax and introduction of land and wealth taxes.

2. Ensure all disabled people who want to work can do so

Disabled people face multiple barriers to the workplace and the Disability Employment Gap in Scotland stubbornly remains at 31.5%.[2] We need change to make work possible and sustainable for all disabled people who want to work.

To do this:

- Scottish Government and public sector should lead by example. This means recruiting, developing, retaining and promoting more disabled workers in the Scottish Government and ensuring the necessary support is in place. It means making Disability Equality Training mandatory and moving towards disability equality competence as the norm.
- More employers need more support to be open to and inclusive of disabled people.
- We should provide accessible, tailored employability support for disabled people.
- We must maintain routes to Access to Work including mitigating any changes proposed by the UK Government.
- We must increase accessible childcare for disabled children and social care for disabled parents.

- We must boost investment in inclusive, accessible mainstream education and training for disabled people of all ages.
- We should ensure options for lifelong learning, including for disabled people who are further from the labour market.

3. Invest in public services which uphold disabled people's freedom and opportunities

All in Government value the concepts of prevention and early intervention. But the reality for many disabled people in Scotland is the opposite: public services that don't meet needs, long waiting lists for health services and a lack of access to appropriate, good quality support. It's time to:

- Make sure social care support for disabled people meets needs, enables choices and a life of meaning. We must ensure consistency of delivery in Self-Directed Support.
- Scrap social care charges which have become a tax on disability and are trapping disabled people in poverty.
- Expand access to the re-opened Independent Living Fund.
- Enable DPOs to make direct referrals to the Independent Living Fund.
- Increase investment in more accessible health services to tackle lifelong health inequalities and improve life outcomes including public screening programmes
- Increase funding and expand provision of palliative care.
- Boost responsive and accessible mental health and wellbeing services and supports for disabled people, like GDA Wellbeing.
- Ensure disabled people are able to access and benefit from public and preventative health policies, practice and campaigns
- Invest in building accessible, affordable social housing, including setting targets for barrier-free, "houses for life" for disabled people. Provide accessible information to disabled people about housing rights and help available with adaptation grants.
- Ensure disabled people's access to public services and spaces, including buildings, transport, information and communication.

4. Make it possible for disabled people to participate in society

Participating in society, even just being able to socialise outside the home, is a core human need. It's something that most non-disabled people take for granted. Yet 75% of disabled people responding to our Member Survey said they were rarely able to socialise outside the home. This is due to costs, inaccessible transport and venues, unwelcoming - sometimes even hostile - attitudes. To address this, we need to create the conditions where disabled people can routinely participate in all aspects of life and society.
We must:

- Invest in inclusive, holistic supports which maintain wellbeing such as community connectors/navigators; accessible community learning and development; cultural and leisure services; and facilities and connections to information, services and opportunities; and continue to invest in the Social Isolation and Loneliness Fund.
- Create new accessibility and inclusion standards in relation to climate policy, transport, the built environment and public realm in order to achieve a genuinely Just Transition.
- Commit to co-designing and co-producing policies, programmes, services, strategies and plans with disabled people and DPOs. Include accountability and oversight mechanisms.
- Ensure disabled people can speak to human beings about services, rather than providing digital, technical or AI solutions by default.
- Eradicate digital exclusion by introducing affordable broadband social tariffs. Resource projects that reduce digital exclusion, like GDA Connects.
- Increase the Improving Access Fund established in the DEP to allow DPOs to run programmes and services which reduce poverty and inequality and improve disabled people's lives.
- Ensure funders understand the resources required to ensure the participation of disabled people.

5. Strengthen and uphold disabled people's rights

For disabled people in Scotland, equality and human rights are key concerns. 82% of respondents to our survey said they felt they had been treated differently or unfairly because they were disabled. The Scottish Government shelving its proposed Human Rights Bill has intensified this sense of being deprioritised. We must:

- Embed responsibility for disabled people's rights across the Scottish Cabinet, instead of limiting it to one directorate.
- Increase disability equality competence across all public bodies, including by strengthening the Public Sector Equality Duty.
- Revive the Scottish Human Rights Bill, including incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People into domestic law. This process can apply learnings from the successful incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Invest in the existing infrastructure that law centres provide, piloting Disability Law Centres which deliver inclusive, accessible legal and advice services.
- Pilot a year-long study into the impact of providing non-means tested legal aid for all discrimination cases.
- Oppose the legislative progression of the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults (Scotland) Bill.
- Commit to increase the Improving Access Fund, as embedded in the DEP, to support the network of DPOs to inform disabled people about rights; build capacity to understand these rights; and support them to advocate for and claim rights.
- Provide financial support to disabled election candidates to meet extra costs of disability.

Change the Narrative and Trust the Scottish People

Hostility aimed at people on benefits has increased, largely in part to the rhetoric used by some politicians, driven by the UK Government Pathways to Work Green paper and related legislation, and amplified by the media and rise of the far right. Disabled people feel attacked and worthless, made out to be benefit scroungers with assessors and decision-makers starting from the default position that they are fraudulently playing the system. In reality, 84% of GDA survey respondents said benefits were hard to apply for and receive. Respondents described feeling stigmatised, having to justify their existence.

While a false narrative has taken root, there is evidence to suggest it does not accurately reflect the views of the general public. People in Scotland - and across the UK - are more compassionate than they are often given credit for. Surveys show that the UK Government's proposed cuts were deeply unpopular with a majority of people. And we know that people in Scotland are far more likely than not to back social investment and redistribution, as evidenced by the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, which shows:

- Almost half (47%) of respondents thought the government should increase taxes and spend more on health, education, and social benefits. Only 12% want to reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits.
- Half of people (50%) agreed that Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well-off.

The next Parliament must be bolder in challenging the pervasive narrative that spending on benefits is unsustainable and trust that the general public are more supportive than is often presumed.

Conclusion

For these essential actions to be taken forward, the next Parliament must ensure disabled people are at the heart of all discussions and decision-making. Disabled people's participation must be resourced and embedded in all policy and service design and delivery. The acknowledgement within the DEP for the need to increase disability competence, cross-cutting through all political levels, is a step in the right direction. Parliamentarians need to understand the everyday reality of disabled people's lives, and be cognisant of that reality when making decisions. DPOs also have a vital role here, and the next Parliament needs to invest in DPOs, as the mandated representative organisations of disabled people, and treat them as equal partners in shaping actions and delivering solutions.

Tax justice is the test of MSPs' commitment to a better Scotland

*Sara Cowan,
Director, Scottish Women's Budget Group and member of Tax Justice Scotland*

Our economy isn't working for too many people. This is leaving certain groups, particularly women, disabled people, those on low incomes and people from black and ethnic minority communities having to take the strain and often facing much greater risk of being pushed into poverty. While the focus tends to fall on spending interventions to help address this injustice, the question of how that money is raised is increasingly crucial in resetting the balance, while helping to tackle inequality and poverty.

Over the course of this Scottish Parliament, the debate on tax fairness has been characterised by uneven progress. Conversations about tax - long centred narrowly on rates, budgets, and technical adjustments - have started to broaden. Increasingly, Scotland is considering taxation as something deeper: a reflection of our collective values, a tool for shaping society, and a cornerstone of our commitment to fairness.

Yet the use of Scotland's devolved tax powers has generally centred myopically on Income Tax, with wider reforms, particularly to Council Tax, stalled by political inaction. Moving the narrative and action meaningfully forward on tax is critical if persistent, long-term inequalities are to be tackled in the coming years.
Some progress has been made.

Tax policy is also increasingly central to Scottish Parliament discourse. In committee inquiries, budget debates, and briefing papers, tax is increasingly discussed - and not merely as a revenue mechanism, but as a means of securing dignity, opportunity, and wellbeing.
Outside of Parliament – the creation of the multi-partner joint campaign Tax Justice Scotland has been critical to nurturing a new, better narrative on tax. We represent a growing and increasingly coordinated movement for tax justice across Scotland. More than fifty organisations have joined forces to call for a bold overhaul of Scotland's tax system as part of fairer UK and global tax systems. We include a wide range of groups, from anti-poverty groups, trade unions, environmental organisations and women's organisations to disabled people's organisations, think tanks, social enterprise - and a range of individuals.

This broad coalition hasn't merely lobbied from the sidelines – we've started the hard work of changing the terms of public debate on tax and made justice a central test of political ambition. We are helping to reframe tax in moral and human terms - as a tool to deliver a fairer and more environmentally sustainable Scotland. Civic Scotland is increasingly making clear that tax is fundamentally about tackling inequality, realising fundamental human rights and the real-life conditions they shape.

In Parliament we put a spotlight on the issue of wealth inequality. Scotland has long struggled with stark disparities in wealth, but the issue has too often sat at the margins of political conversation – that changed noticeably during this term.

The releases of new government inequality data sparked strong responses from civic Scotland, highlighting the vast unfairness at the heart of our society. We hope, over time, this will strengthen the public's understanding of the scale of the problem, while pushing discussions of the measures needed to address it, including better wealth taxation, into mainstream political discourse.
Wealth inequality is a key concern for women's equality. Men hold higher levels of wealth and failures to adequately tax wealth represent a tax break for wealthy men. A report by the STUC, as part of the Tax Justice Scotland campaign, showed how a fair wealth tax could raise almost half a billion pounds per year from the country's ten richest families alone. If implemented UK-wide, it would implement significantly more - particularly if accompanied by improvement to existing wealth taxes.

During this Parliament, we have also played a role in elevating the importance of fiscal honesty. Scotland's public finances are in a critical state, and the resulting cuts in investment for our vital public services hurt all of us but are not felt evenly. Women, disabled people, people from black and ethnic minority communities are more likely to be pushed into poverty by our unjust economy that fails to recognise the role of unpaid care or to value care more broadly. At the Scottish Women's Budget Group, our annual review of local government finances highlights that areas marked for cuts - such as social care services, school patrols, or school transport - are more likely to be relied on by women as they are disproportionately responsible for unpaid care.

An area in which we are increasingly hopeful for progress is in strengthening the link between climate policy and tax policy. Tax Justice Scotland and Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, told it like it is – those with higher incomes and wealth tend to pollute more, while those with the least are disproportionately vulnerable to climate impacts.7 Taxation needs to be discussed as an essential part of Scotland's just transition. Whether it was by forcing action on taxing private jets,8 or by starting debates on making polluters pay in line with the damage they are causing, campaigners in this Parliament have helped to embed increasing recognition that climate justice and tax justice are inseparable.

However, perhaps no area better illustrates the ongoing urgency for tax reform, nor the need for political courage and leadership, than the long-running debate over local taxation. For decades, Scotland's Council Tax has been widely criticised as unjust, unfair, and unfit for purpose. As far back as 2015, the Commission on Local Tax Reform set out the case for change following wide ranging public engagement. Its recommendations were ignored. In October last year, we saw yet another Council Tax consultation launched by the Scottish Government.

Alongside this, successive years of Council Tax freezes have left local finance in a precarious position and done little to tackle inequality.

In the last Scottish Budget we saw very small progress on Council Tax with measures promised to raise some more revenue from people in Scotland's most expensive homes. However, a complete redesign is long over due.

That's why Tax Justice Scotland threw down the gauntlet to Scotland's political leaders this year. We've demanded they end decades of inaction and make clear, unequivocal commitments to replace the unfair and outdated Council Tax in their 2026 election manifestos.

Inaction on Council Tax can no longer be tolerated. After all, this has resulted in local services being starved of the resources they patently need. Again, this disproportionately affects women, with further impact being felt by marginalised women who so often pick up the pieces when services fall short. It's clearer than ever that we need a nationwide property revaluation as a necessary step towards fundamental reform.

Our polling shows that five times as many Scots support urgent Council Tax reform as oppose it – a decisive mandate for change. If Council Tax is reformed or replaced, an overwhelming 83% of people in Scotland want a fairer system; with people in higher-value homes either paying proportionately more than people in lower-value homes (57%), or everyone paying the same share regardless of their property value (26%). Just 2% want people in lower-value homes to pay proportionately more than people in higher value housing, showing near-total rejection of the unfair status quo created by the current Council Tax.

Alongside local tax reform, with increasingly clear warnings about a shortfall in public spending even to fund existing commitments, it's increasingly clear that we need a wider national conversation on the tax we all pay. Funding the services we'd like to see will likely mean a lot of us have to pay a bit more tax. In conversations with women, we've heard both support for the need to pay more tax to achieve quality services but also the need to improve communication and transparency on financial decision-making at national and local level. This would support a rebuilding of trust in politics.

In parallel, the next Parliament should embed gender and human rights budgeting approaches across government. We have repeatedly underscored the importance of linking revenue-raising decisions with tackling structural inequalities and the delivery of rights-based services. This approach prevents budgets from becoming abstract financial exercises and instead focuses attention on the real-world outcomes people experience.

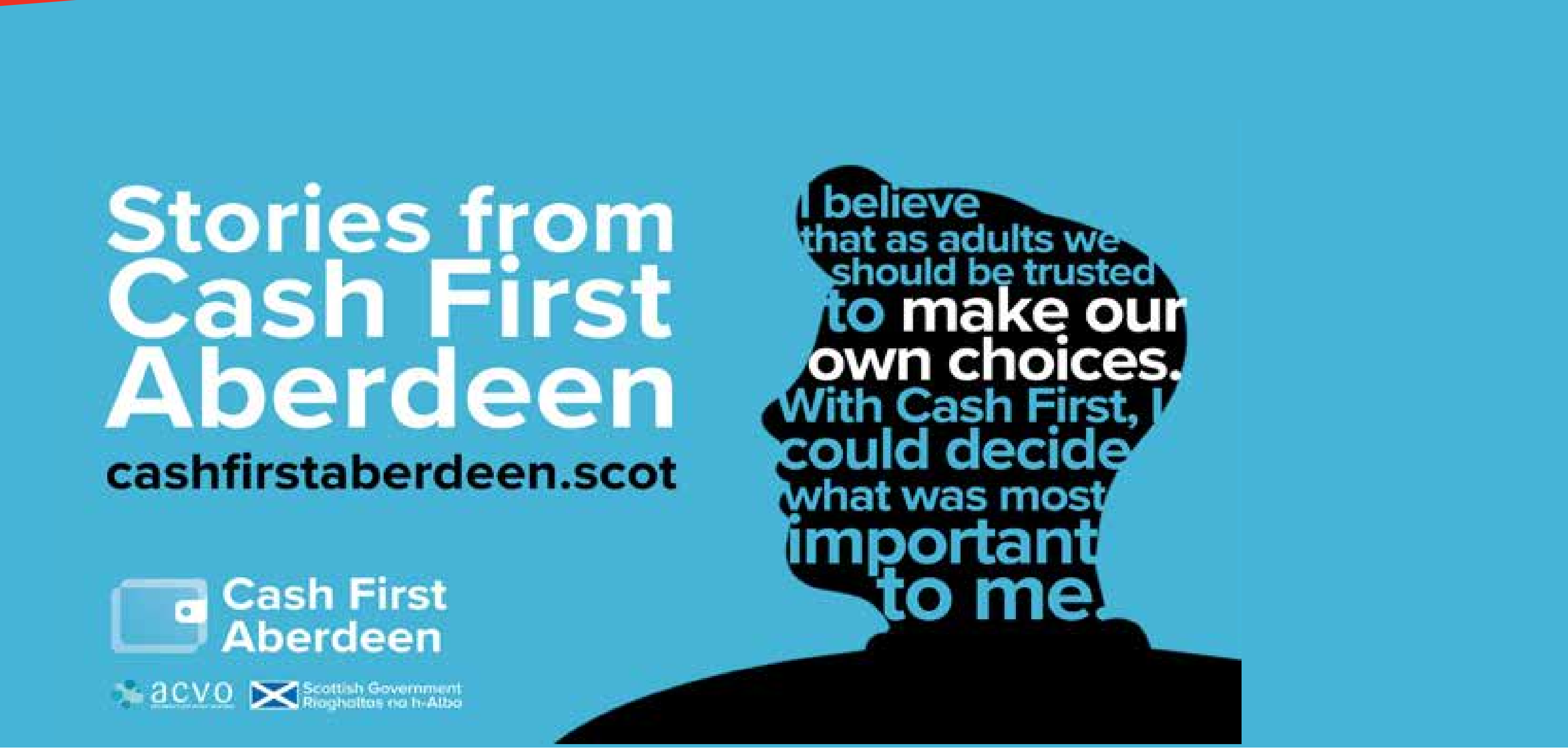
Continued work must also be done to ensure that taxation supports Scotland's climate ambitions. The next Parliament has a vital opportunity to align revenue systems more closely with climate objectives, ensuring that taxation accelerates Scotland's transition to a low-carbon future. This includes protecting and prioritsing low-income households from climate-related costs while ensuring that those with disproportionate environmental footprints carry their fair share of responsibility.

Finally, the next Parliament must be honest about the level of revenue required to sustain and improve Scotland's vital local and public services. The pressures on health, education, social care, and community services are profound. It's naive, bordering on ludicrous, to suggest that they can be resolved by public sector reform alone. Strengthening these pillars of society, particularly amid an ageing population, will require a tax system that is not only fair but also robust enough to support long-term investment. At present, too much of our economy relies on unpaid care work, the majority of which is undertaken by women entrenching women's inequality. Rejecting austerity-driven approaches and embracing sustainable, progressive revenue raising models will be essential for Scotland to thrive in the years ahead.

Tax Justice Scotland and its members have a lot to be proud of – Scotland's political conversation is more conscious, its tax debates are more grounded in justice, and its public is becoming more engaged with the importance of fair taxation. However, we must build on that foundation with courage and clarity. The coming Parliament has the chance to be the most ambitious in Scotland's history in terms of tax reform. Whether it will meet that moment depends on the willingness of Scotland's new batch of MSPs to act boldly, guided by evidence, fairness, and the lessons of this past term.

Reflecting on the last five years is vital as we look forward to what must happen next. As Scotland approaches the next parliamentary term, the need for bold action has never been more apparent - on the social care crisis, on the housing emergency, on the climate crisis, on ending child poverty and on much more besides. The signs of progress made during this Parliament must now be transformed into deeper reform of we're to build a better, fairer and more sustainable Scotland.

Our new MSPs must take this forward early in the next Parliament, starting by laying the groundwork for a new local taxation system that reflects ability to pay, supports local services, and strengthens local democratic accountability. Anything less would fall short of what people in Scotland are rightly demanding. Scotland stands on the threshold of transformative change. But the progress we make together towards tax justice is likely to help determine what kind of nation it becomes.



Amy Duncan, Cash First Network Co-ordinator, ACVO TSI

Aberdeen Cash First Network forms part of the Scottish Government pilot - "Cash-First: Towards Ending the Need for Food Banks in Scotland" – which sets out a human rights approach to tackling food insecurity.

The Cash First approach is part of the Scottish Government's response to financial hardship and their aim to reduce the need for emergency food provision. It offers a test of change to understand how financial support can replace emergency food provision across Scotland; with the aim of creating more dignified solutions to crisis support through improving urgent access to cash in a crisis, and by providing money advice and holistic support services to prevent future hardship.

Across the 8 national pilot areas, each locality has chosen a different demographic and implemented a different approach to distribution of funding based on the individual needs and systems available.

Trusted Partner Model

To meet the aims of the pilot project, ACVO have developed partnerships with 7 organisations who can identify and refer those eligible for the Flexible Crisis Fund. The partner organisations able to refer individuals to the Fund are CFINE, Instant Neighbour, Aberdeen North Foodbank, Alcohol & Drugs Action, Aberdeen Cyrenians, Aberdeen Foyer, and Social Bite.

The trusted partner model is crucial for maintaining control over referrals, ensuring that the available funding is distributed effectively while also monitoring how the financial and holistic wrap-around support offered impacts on the individuals use of food banks in the long-term.
The Aberdeen Cash First Project is not just about emergency financial relief - it is about looking at new ways of how crisis support can be delivered through strategic partnerships.

Demographic

Co-designed by the partnership and individuals with lived experience, the fund delivered financial assistance and person-centred support to single males aged 18 to 45 who were in receipt of Universal Credit and presenting at food banks in crisis.

We met with the project partners who operate food banks in the city who identified that the chosen demographic were the most frequent users of emergency food provision within the city.

Additionally, many single males who are in receipt of Universal Credit are classed as destitute as they are on the lowest level of income and are the hardest demographic to support out of poverty due to the deep-rooted nature of issues often as a result of failure to succeed with early intervention approaches.
Young, single men are often seen as a notoriously difficult demographic to support because of several barriers including gender-based pride, stigma and societal attitudes. Many funding and wrap-around support services focus on 'easier to reach' groups, leaving a gap in the availability of funding and support opportunities to this demographic.

Flexible Crisis Fund

Individuals can be referred to the Flexible Crisis Fund through trusted partner organisations involved with the Cash First Network. The trusted partners can refer the individual for up to £600 – either in one-off or reoccurring payments – depending on their level of need.

Cash First funding offers flexibility and choice for the recipients to decide what their immediate needs are and on what they wish to spend the money on; for example, food and essential items, paying off a rent arrear, or paying for a space on a training opportunity to help them get back into employment.

The crisis fund is delivered to the individuals via vouchers, cash payments or direct payments depending on their ability to budget the funding and any risks around providing them with cash payments.

Pilot Outcomes

The Cash First pilot demonstrated the transformative effect of choice, dignity and trust for a demographic often considered as hard to reach. Launched on the 4th of November 2024, the Flexible Crisis Fund supported 157 individuals upon closure on in January 2026.
Those who have received support are facing a wide range of challenges: different housing circumstances, multiple or complex health needs, addiction or recovery and issues with benefit payments.

Cash First also takes a person-centred approach in identifying and connecting people with additional wrap-around support. Most recipients are signposted to welfare and money advice – helping to maximise income, apply for benefits or receiving debt or budgeting advice. Fuel poverty support, employability-based support, housing support, furniture support, addiction and recovery support, and to access IT equipment were also key area's for holistic referrals.

Monitoring shows that, by January 2026, foodbank use among recipients had dropped by 95%, with 72% not returning to a food bank since receiving Cash First funding. Beyond food insecurity, we have recorded the impact of wider outcomes such as:

- 62% of recipients were able to maximise their income
- 80% experienced an increase in access to wrap-around support
- 76% reported feeling improvements in their mental health and wellbeing, reducing their long-term need for crisis support

Key Findings

A key principle underpinning the success of the Cash First Network is the genuine involvement of people with lived experience in shaping and codesigning the project. While lived experience is increasingly recognised as essential to effective service and policy development, failing to engage meaningfully risks creating initiatives that do not fully reflect the needs of those they are intended to support, leading to ongoing gaps and repeated redesign.

Listening to individuals with lived experience of crisis support has been essential.

Surveys with 70 individuals identified the real pressures driving foodbank use: insufficient income to cover rising costs, challenges with the benefits system and the emotional barriers that make it hard for people to ask for help. Words like 'embarrassed', 'shamed' and 'judged' came up frequently.

The surveys also revealed gaps in awareness of support services across Aberdeen. Individuals repeatedly telling their story to different professionals was causing frustration, reinforcing the need for a single point of contact.
By embedding lived experience alongside the knowledge and expertise of professionals, the project was able to evolve in response to reallife challenges. This collaboration ensured that individuals received crisis support payments and wraparound assistance in a way that was personcentred, designed to minimise risk and reduce the long-term impact of poverty.

Poverty is fundamentally a matter of human rights, and the Cash First approach recognises this. At its heart is the principle of choice, ensuring that people have the power to make decisions that best support their own wellbeing. A Cash First model is rooted in a human rights–based framework, which emphasises dignity, autonomy and the right to an adequate standard of living. When individuals are provided with direct financial support, their wider rights - such as access to food, housing, education and health - are strengthened rather than restricted.

By promoting approaches that respect and uphold economic, social and cultural rights, Cash First contributes to reducing poverty and encourages systems that ensure these rights are fully realised in practice.

In Aberdeen, partner organisations remain concerned that the use of foodbanks and emergency crisis provision continues to rise beyond those supported through Cash First interventions. While the Aberdeen Cash First Network has demonstrated significant impact over the pilot period, there is a clear need to consider how this approach could be expanded. We invite the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament to reflect on the value of a broader Cash First model and explore how scaling it up could meaningfully reduce reliance on foodbanks over the next parliamentary term.

Learn more at www.cashfirstaberdeen.scot, where you can read Stories from Cash First Aberdeen. The project shares personal accounts outlining the challenges individuals have faced and the role direct, flexible financial support has played in helping them move forward.

Sharing our learning on how MSPs can tackle rural poverty injustice

Ralph Hartley, Policy Officer, The Poverty Alliance

In December last year almost a hundred people from across rural and island Scotland joined us online to discuss the priorities for the next Scottish parliament when it comes to tackling the injustice of poverty in our rural and island communities. We were joined by colleagues from Wales and Ireland, who shared the policy contexts in those countries and we heard about the continuity of experience between rural communities across Britain and Ireland, who continually find themselves on the periphery of policy making.

Most powerful of all though, was the contribution made by a member of our Aberdeenshire Citizen Panel – Sally. Sally shared with us the beautiful view from her bedroom window and her gratitude for it.

But, she also shared the experiences that she and other members of the Citizens Panels have of living in rural Scotland amounting to “battles in every aspect of the basic essentials of life – access to food, transport, housing, healthcare and childcare”

Sally took us back to the view from her house, to give us the complete picture. She told us about the reality of her life which encompassed the beauty in the original picture, as well as a broader, more complicated vision. She showed us the wider view, which included a busy, fast main road and a pig farm ‘always visible and often smelly’.

Sally wanted the event attendees to think about and recognise the contradictions of rural and island life, by contrasting these two pictures.

She helped us understand that whilst our rural and island communities provide the food we eat, the energy we use and the landscapes that define us - many are struggling. Around 190,000 people – including 15% of children – living in rural Scotland experience relative poverty.

This is in part because it costs an estimated 15–30% more to achieve a basic standard of living in remote rural Scotland than in urban areas.

Though this powerful juxtaposition of images, Sally illustrated the task for whoever makes up the next Scottish Government – to make policy which reflects the reality of people’s lives, builds on the strengths of rural communities whilst tackling the challenges they face head on – not least the unjust additional cost of living, ‘the rural premium’.

This has been a key focus for the Taking Action on Rural Poverty project at the Poverty Alliance, since it began in 2023. From our work in Argyll and Bute and Aberdeenshire, and from the brilliant discussions we have been able to have with civil society partners from these areas and beyond in events like the one we held in December we have built a set of key messages and policy priorities which will form the basis of our policy and influencing work heading into the next parliament. As we head towards the election, we hope that all Scottish political parties will take seriously the need to have a strong vision for our rural and island communities that has anti-poverty at its heart.

To do this, we need policies that explicitly address the rural premium, alongside wider action to boost incomes and improve access to high-quality services. This demands bespoke policymaking, informed by a recognition that not all rural and island communities are the same. Whilst it has been disappointing that the Scottish Government has chosen not to publish a rural delivery plan in the course of this parliament, this does provide an opportunity for the next Government to look holistically at the needs of rural and island Scotland together, with a strong focus on the cost of living.

A new government could produce an overarching plan for rural and island communities (which wouldn't preclude specific measures for islands) and could have bold targets to bring down the cost of living. To do this, it should establish a cross government rural antipoverty taskforce to drive coordination and accountability.

This taskforce would need to focus on the key areas which drive poverty in rural and island Scotland, supporting policy teams across Scottish government to ensure general policies reflect rural and island needs and, just as importantly, driving innovative and targeted interventions designed specifically to support rural and island communities. Many policy areas will need attention, but at the Poverty Alliance we will begin by pushing the new Scottish Government to act decisively on fuel poverty, rural transport, accessible childcare, social security and fair work.

Despite being energy rich and hosting much of Scotland's energy infrastructure, rural and island communities experience some of the highest electricity prices in Europe. This imbalance is unjust and requires decisive action. We need a Scottish Government who will continue to press for the implementation of a robust Social Tariff and act as a consumer champion for rural and island communities. This means designing and funding retrofit and clean heating schemes which deliver genuine bill savings, with clear accountability and remediation where costs increase for consumers. This will need to be based on a system of well-funded, high quality, independent and locally based advice.

Affordable, reliable transport is essential for accessing work, healthcare, education and childcare. In rural and island communities, limited or non-existent public transport increases reliance on private cars, adding around £50 per week to household costs on average, and more for those dependent on ferries or overnight mainland stays to access work, education or healthcare. The next Scottish Government must deliver on the promise of greater public control of transport systems and must recognise the specific needs of rural and island areas – particularly the vital role of community transport providers. To begin this, it should strengthen the role of community transport within national and local transport planning, backed by stable funding.

Accessible childcare is critical to tackling poverty, particularly for women and lone parents, who are overrepresented among low-income households in rural and island communities. However, current childcare provision often does not fit rural lives. Standard daytime models are poorly aligned with sectors such as hospitality, where irregular and evening work is common. Long travel distances increase costs for parents, while fluctuating or declining populations make it harder to sustain small local settings – reinforcing depopulation. The next Scottish Government should work with rural local authorities, providers and parents on low incomes to pilot and fully evaluate flexible childcare models tailored to rural and island contexts.

Social security is a vital public service, but devolved benefits do not yet reflect the higher costs and distinct labour markets of rural and island Scotland where pay is often lower overall and self-employment and seasonal work with fluctuating incomes are more common.

Despite higher rural living costs, social security payment levels are uniform across Scotland.

Take up of entitlements, including Free School Meals, is also lower in rural areas, partly due to data sharing barriers. The next Scottish Government should introduce a 12-week run-on of the Scottish Child Payment to protect rural families with fluctuating incomes; and update the benefit take up strategy with rural and island specific actions, including a review of Free School Meal eligibility and registration to improve rural access.

Rural economies rely heavily on sectors such as agriculture, fishing, construction and hospitality. While these sectors are vital, they are often characterised by low pay, insecurity and seasonal hours. As a result, in work poverty in rural areas is rising.2 Limited access to transport, childcare and skills development further restricts opportunities. The combined effect is a shortage of secure, well-paid jobs. This contributes to poverty and long-term depopulation as young people leave and do not return. The next Scottish Government should renew efforts to embed Fair Work across the economy and provide specific leadership for rural and island areas by establishing a rural and island Fair Work Convention to identify cross-cutting barriers, enablers and priority actions across key sectors.

If the next Scottish Government is serious about tackling poverty, it must start by seeing rural and island Scotland in the round: not as postcard landscapes or 'remote' places, but as communities of people whose lives are too often made harder than they should be by the cost of living. Good policy must reckon with the whole picture.

Next Parliament can fulfil Scotland's fuel poverty pledges

Frazer Scott,
Chief Executive,
Energy Action
Scotland

It is simply wrong that so many of Scotland's households are living in fuel poverty – especially because our nation is now a recognised leader in generating cheap, renewable energy. Political leaders in successive Scottish Parliaments have pledged to tackle this injustice at the heart of our society.

In 2019, MSPs unanimously voted for the Fuel Poverty Act. It set down legal targets, saying that by 2040, no more than 5% of households in Scotland should be in fuel poverty, and no more than 1% should find themselves in extreme fuel poverty. There are 2030 interim targets – with a maximum of 15% of households in fuel poverty, and 5% in extreme fuel poverty1.

Unfortunately, since the Act was passed, things have got worse. In 2019, the fuel poverty rate was around 25% - it's now 29%. In 2019, around 12% of Scottish households were in extreme fuel poverty – now there are 14%2.

And, of course, poorer households in Scotland are at much higher risk. An incredible 96% of households with an annual net income of less than £15,000 are estimated to be in fuel poverty3. The impact on these people can't be exaggerated. Fuel poverty has been associated in the development of early onset asthma in children, exacerbation of asthma, cognitive impairment, respiratory diseases, cardiovascular diseases, mental health issues, diseases amongst older groups, and can have a number of other effects on the health of an individual.

Rocketing bills

It is obviously true that some of the factors behind that sorry story are far outside the control of our MSPs.

Domestic gas and electricity prices increased rapidly during the energy crisis of late 2021 to early 2023, caused by the war in Ukraine and increasing demand as society opened up again after the pandemic.

Energy prices in the UK are regulated by Ofgem. They put in place a price cap that suppliers have to follow. In April 2022 the price cap went up 54% - and then rose again by 27% in October 2022. They would have increased by an even greater amount if the Liz Truss Conservative government hadn't brought in an Energy Price Guarantee5.

Energy prices have fallen back since then, but even before the war in Iran they were still 35% above pre-energy crisis levels. When the present energy cap ends in July 2026, some experts predict that bills will rise by around £250 a year – and that could be just the start of yet another energy crisis.

Fixing the problem of high energy costs has to be done at UK level, by Ofgem and the Westminster Government. Energy Action Scotland has joined others in calling for a real a comprehensive and flexible social tariff that will guarantee lower bills for low-income households, as well as those with unavoidably high energy needs such as disabled people who need to charge equipment designed to help them live. Our new MSPs should join us in putting pressure on the UK Government.

But high energy costs are just one of four key factors that drive fuel poverty. The others are low disposable incomes; poor energy efficiency in Scotland's homes; and energy use within homes. And in these areas, the Scottish Parliament can make a big difference to the lives of people in fuel poverty.

Boosting incomes

We were very worried when the UK Government announced that it would restrict Winter Fuel Payments for older people – making them available only to households in receipt of Pension Credit. There are around 300,000 pensioner households in fuel poverty in Scotland, and the loss of this support could have left many of them out in the cold. So, we were pleased when the Scottish Government took on responsibility for the payments (renamed the Pension Age Winter Heating Payment) and decided to continue to make it available to every pensioner household.

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Stopping the leaks

UK homes leak heat much more than other countries in northern Europe. One study found that - with an indoor temperature of 20 degrees C and an outside temperature of 0C - UK homes lost 3C on average after five hours. That is up to three times as much as homes in some other European countries like Germany.
In Scotland more people die in the four months from December to March than during the rest of the year. There were 2,704 'excess' deaths in Scotland during the winter of 2024-25. Factors affecting excess winter mortality are varied and complex, but there is a strong link to heating standards in housing.

The UK has much higher winter deaths rates than other countries with more severe winter climates, implying that it is not outdoor exposure to cold that is the key issue. Northern Finland, where winter temperatures regularly drop to -20C, has a significantly lower rate of excess winter deaths than the UK. However, Finnish buildings have historically had much higher levels of insulation and whole house central heating has been the norm for years8. It's generally accepted that the number of excess winter deaths could be reduced if everyone could be kept warm in their homes during the winter months.

Scotland's system of Energy Performance Certificates is a way of measuring the energy efficiency of our homes – EPC A homes are the most efficient, and EPC G are the least. EPC C is recognised as the minimum standard need to prevent ill health and protect people from fuel poverty – but a shocking 44% of Scotland's homes fall below tha.

For new build homes, the Scottish Government is developing plans for a new Passivhaus equivalent standard. The Passivhaus standard was developed in Germany and focusses on delivering buildings with very low energy demand, reducing emissions and keeping fuel bills low. The Scottish Passivhaus equivalent is planned to be introduced as a voluntary standard for housebuilders, before becoming mandatory from 202810.

But we believe that much more needs to be done to retrofit Scotland's existing homes leak less heat – and the next Scottish Government can help by investing more to support the retrofit of homes below EPC C. That help should be targeted to make sure that households at the highest risk of fuel poverty get the help they need. That means investing in multiyear funding for the Warmer Homes Scotland programme, and the Area Based Schemes that deliver energy efficiency in areas with high levels of fuel poverty. If these schemes were aligned more closely with other public and private support schemes from the UK Government and others, we believe there could be real benefits.

It also means investing more in Home Energy Scotland, and local voluntary and community organisations, so that people get the help and information they need to access cash support to make their homes warmer.

Energy use within homes

Scotland cannot reach net zero without moving beyond fossil fuel heating. But if that transition goes ahead without tackling fuel poverty, it will deepen existing inequalities and leave many low-income households behind.
A just transition must ensure that everyone benefits—especially those already struggling to afford a warm home. The next Scottish Government can remove the cost barriers that prevent households, particularly those in or at risk of fuel poverty, from accessing energy efficiency upgrades and clean heating solutions.

Renewable technologies like heat pumps, solar panels, and domestic battery storage should be available to everyone in Scotland. They can help cut energy costs for fuel-poor households, and for those who are currently forced to rely on oil and LPG for their home heating.

Trust and accountability

Our recent Scottish Parliament election hustings11 gave people the chance to hear directly from political parties about their plans to address energy efficiency of buildings and retrofit, support for households, and support for the advice and third sectors.It was a good discussion, and we are grateful to all the party representatives who took part. All our new MSPs have the chance to rebuild trust with a disillusioned electorate, by delivering on the issues that people really care about and investing to build a better Scotland beyond the injustice of fuel poverty.

Scotland's Living Wage Movement and the path ahead through the new Parliament

Rachel Morrison-McCormick
Living Wage Projects Coordinator, Living Wage Scotland

Over the last parliamentary term, Scotland has shown that meaningful progress on fair pay is not only possible, but transformative.

In a period marked by global volatility, economic uncertainty, and pressure on household budgets, Scotland's Living Wage movement has demonstrated what can be achieved when employers, government, communities and campaigning organisations pull in the same direction. It is a story of perseverance, moral clarity, and practical ambition: a commitment to ensuring that work genuinely provides the foundations for a dignified life.

This progress did not emerge in a vacuum. It was built on Scotland's longstanding ambition to become a leading Fair Work nation, an ambition articulated clearly in the Fair Work Action Plan and reinforced by a decade of evidence showing that fair pay and secure work strengthen not only families but the wider economy.

Across the last Parliament, Scottish employers continued to lead the UK in paying the real Living Wage, with Scotland consistently achieving the lowest rate of low pay across the UK, 11.3% compared to 14.6% across the UK as a whole.. That success has been driven by active collaboration between government and partners, including Living Wage Scotland and the many accredited employers who saw paying the real Living Wage as a hallmark of responsible business practice and a proven route to improved morale, retention and productivity.

The real Living Wage remains the only UK wage rate calculated on the real cost of living. It is voluntarily paid by businesses who have chosen to transform the lives of their workers and raise the bar for what decent work looks like in Scotland and across the UK.

The scale of our impact is unmistakable. Living Wage Scotland, launched by the Poverty Alliance in 2014 in partnership with Living Wage Foundation and supported by The Scottish Government, has grown into a movement of more than 4,000 accredited employers. These employers represent every corner of Scotland's economy - from hospitality to technology, from retail to social care, and from arts and culture to finance. Their collective action ensured that more than 72,000 workers received a pay rise to the real Living Wage over the last decade. These increases amounted to more than £680 million in additional wages going directly into the pockets of low paid workers in Scotland.

In an era when the rising cost of essentials stretches household budgets to breaking point, these uplifts make a measurable difference to workers' ability to meet their everyday needs, avoid impossible choices, and sustain the basic dignity that fair work should afford everyone.
This movement is rooted in values that extended far beyond pay. The Living Wage campaign in Scotland emerged from the efforts of workers, grassroots activists, community leaders, faith groups and trade unions who recognised that low pay was not simply an economic challenge but a social injustice.

As the campaign has grown, so has its evidence base. Employers report repeatedly that accreditation brings significant benefits beyond the moral imperative: 94% describe positive impacts on recruitment, retention and productivity, proving that good work and good business are not competing aims. Many also say that accreditation enhances their reputation and strengthens relationships with employees, customers and communities. These lived experiences and employer testimonies help shift public debate, demonstrating that the Living Wage is not only desirable but achievable - and that Scotland's businesses, large and small, are able not only to absorb the cost but to thrive through it.

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The pace of progress during the last Parliament was also shaped by government policy. Fair Work First conditions are now being applied to more than £3.42 billion of public sector grant funding, ensuring that organisations benefiting from public money upheld fair work principles, including the real Living Wage. Government investment in fair access to employment schemes further supported thousands of people to access and sustain fair work, particularly those from groups historically disadvantaged in the labour market. The result was a labour market landscape increasingly aligned with fairness, opportunity and security - even in the face of economic shocks.

The Living Wage movement's evolution also reflected a broader shift in what good work means. Living Hours accreditation - ensuring secure and predictable working hours - gained momentum, with the number of accredited employers growing sevenfold since the launch of the refreshed Fair Work Action Plan from 17 to 127 Living Hours employers in Scotland, collectively providing more than 45,000 workers with security of hours alongside a Living Wage. Secure hours have become recognised not simply as an extension of fair pay but a necessary partner to it: workers cannot plan, budget or build secure futures if their incomes fluctuate unpredictably from week to week.

The same logic underpins the emerging Living Pension agenda, recognising that a fair retirement should not be a privilege reserved for high earners, but a basic standard afforded to those who work hard throughout their lives so they can afford to live with dignity in retirement.

The last Parliament was also a reminder that times of hardship often test society's commitment to justice - and Scotland's Living Wage movement rose to that challenge. The years since 2020 were shaped by Brexit, the pandemic, inflationary pressures and steep increases in the cost of living. Employers faced what many described as a 'cost of doing business crisis', yet thousands reaffirmed their commitment to fair pay.

They did so knowing that decent wages allow workers to withstand economic shocks and navigate uncertainty with greater security. They did so because they recognised that in tough times, the real Living Wage becomes more - not less - important for families struggling to stay afloat.

And they did so because the Living Wage is not merely a rate - it is a statement about the kind of economy Scotland wants to be.

As Scotland looks ahead to the postelection landscape after May 2026, there is a renewed opportunity for MSPs and the incoming Scottish Government to deepen and extend this progress. The foundations built during the last Parliament provide a platform for even greater ambition. The next phase of the Living Wage movement will require political leadership that treats fair pay, secure hours and dignified pensions not as aspirations but as essentials.

The new Parliament can champion this vision by strengthening Fair Work First and embedding it consistently across procurement, commissioning and public sector supply chains. Fair Work conditionality should continue to evolve in step with the Living Wage, Living Hours and Living Pension standards, ensuring that organisations benefiting from public money model the employment practices Scotland wants to see across the wider economy. This approach should be matched by renewed investment in employer engagement, supporting SMEs - particularly those in cost sensitive sectors - to not only adopt but also sustain accreditation. Scotland's success has long been fuelled by the leadership of smaller employers, and targeted support can help them continue to lead the way.

The next Parliament also has an opportunity to support the expansion of Living Hours and the acceleration of Living Pension commitments across Scotland. Secure hours reduce the anxiety and instability that undermine wellbeing and financial planning. Similarly, a Living Pension helps ensure that workers' futures are not defined by decades of inadequate pay. As Scotland prepares for demographic changes and ongoing economic pressures, embedding retirement security into the Fair Work framework will be critical.

Importantly, MSPs can continue to amplify the stories and successes of accredited employers - businesses that show every day that paying the real Living Wage is not only possible but transformative. From the Stand Comedy Club to Fat Buddha to large scale employers like SSE, ScotRail and FirstBus, the message has been consistent: investing in workers strengthens organisations, improves service quality, and reinforces resilience in turbulent times. Their leadership should be celebrated, and their example should guide future policy development.

The next Scottish Government can also help embed fairness more deeply into the public conversation, aligning economic strategy with wellbeing, sustainability and shared prosperity. This framing - central to Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation - recognises that Fair Work is not a discrete policy area but a necessary pillar of a thriving society. In the years ahead, as external pressures continue to challenge both businesses and workers, maintaining this focus will be essential.

Scotland's Living Wage story is, ultimately, a story about collective will. It is the story of activists and community groups who refused to accept that in work poverty was inevitable. It is the story of employers who saw that treating workers well is a pathway to stronger businesses, not weaker ones. It is the story of policymakers who understood that fair pay is a foundation for reducing child poverty, narrowing structural inequalities and building economic resilience. And it is the story of workers whose labour, commitment and aspirations underpin Scotland's economy every day.

The last Parliament proved what can be achieved when these forces align but there is much more still to be done. With more than 288,000 workers still paid less than the real Living Wage and approximately 250,000 experiencing in secure work and paid less than the real Living Wage we can't afford to stop now. Recent research by Living Wage Foundation showed that if 50% of Scotland's low paid workers were uplifted to the real Living Wage it would put £94 million into the Scottish economy through increases in local spending and tax revenues and reductions in pressure on our social security and healthcare systems. As well as helping to contribute to the reduction in the gender pay gap. The next Parliament offers the chance to go further still. If MSPs and the incoming Scottish Government seize this moment - to expand Living Wage accreditation, strengthen Fair Work First, champion Living Hours, and embed Living Pensions - Scotland can continue to lead the UK, and indeed the world, in demonstrating that fair work is not only morally right but economically smart.

A fairer Scotland is within reach. The Living Wage movement has shown the way. Now, the task is to build on that legacy, ensuring that every worker has the security, dignity and opportunity they deserve.

People are being disenfranchised by deprivation and disillusionment – our next MSPs must act

Alyson Laird,
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Across Scotland, a quiet democratic crisis has been unfolding - one that rarely generates the headlines it deserves but has profound implications for who has a voice in shaping our collective future.

In communities facing high levels of deprivation, fewer and fewer people are voting. Not because they are apathetic or uninterested, but because layers of inequality - economic, political, social - have combined to create conditions where political participation feels increasingly out of reach. Over time, these forces have eroded trust, stifled engagement, and made ballot boxes feel further away for those who arguably have the most at stake.

Recent data paints a stark picture. Our research on turnout during the 2021 Scottish Parliament elections found a striking 11point gap between the ten most and the ten least-deprived constituencies, with average turnout falling to just 57% in the poorest areas compared to 68% in the wealthiest. The biggest democratic deficit was found between Glasgow Maryhill & Springburn with a turnout of 52%, compared to a 76% turnout in Eastwood. When you translate those percentages into people, the democratic deficit becomes even more vivid - tens of thousands of voices missing from Scotland's debates about poverty, public services, and the cost of living.

This is not a uniquely Scottish story. Research from the John Smith Centre shows a similar pattern across the UK. In the 2024 General Election, turnout in the 30 least-deprived constituencies was roughly 20 percentage points higher than in the 30 most-deprived ones. And while voter participation declined everywhere, the drop was more than double in the poorest communities, falling by 11% compared to just 5% in the wealthiest areas.

The trend was clear across the nations: deprived constituencies, including parts of Glasgow, recorded turnout figures in the mid40s, far below the national average.

When turnout gaps reach these levels, the consequences ripple through every part of democratic life. Policies risk being shaped by only a slice of society. Politicians prioritise the issues of those who vote most reliably. Trust decays further. And entire neighbourhoods feel that the political process simply isn't built for them.

The reasons behind these gaps are complex, but they are not mysterious. In many cases, they are painfully familiar. Poverty, low income, insecure work, and underinvestment in local services combine to shrink the mental and emotional bandwidth people have to engage in civic life. The John Smith Centre research also found a significant relationship between income and trust in government: people on incomes above £60,000 were three times more likely to report high trust in politicians compared to those earning £10,000–£20,000 a year. When trust in political institutions is low and life pressures are high, it is no surprise that voting falls down the list.

But distrust is only one piece of the puzzle. A major analysis by UK in a Changing Europe highlights how people who disengaged from the 2024 General Election - especially those who had voted previously - were more likely to be living in lowincome households, employed in workingclass occupations, and exposed to multiple forms of deprivation. Crucially, many said they had no trust in any MP at all. Their disillusionment was not rooted in a lack of caring about issues. Rather, it reflected a growing belief that voting would not meaningfully change their situation. For some, it was the first time they had stepped back from the democratic process, not out of apathy but out of disappointment.

Economic and political instability has deepened this feeling. Repeated crises - the pandemic, rising living costs, political scandals, shortlived governments - have stretched people's faith in the system's ability to deliver. UK in a Changing Europe's analysis found that controversies over political behaviour, such as rulebreaking during lockdown and misconduct scandals, had a particularly corrosive effect on trust among disengaged voters. Many felt politicians were operating in a world far removed from theirs.

Scotland's own electoral system is not immune. While the country performs well on several integrity measures, there remain clear weaknesses in terms of public confidence and the accessibility of elections for marginalised groups, particularly those facing socioeconomic barriers.
There are ongoing questions about how to ensure equal participation and strengthen the legitimacy of Holyrood elections at a time when trust is fragile.
All of this contributes to a wider democratic story: people in deprived communities are not disengaging because they don't care about politics. In fact, organisations working directly with people on low incomes - including the Poverty Alliance - consistently find the opposite. People are engaged, opinionated, and deeply aware of what their communities need. What they lack is faith that political institutions will listen, respond, or deliver. Lowincome communities are often highly political, but increasingly feel disenfranchised from a political process that is failing to address deprivation, poverty, and inequality.

When people see their daily struggles go unaddressed - whether in housing, energy costs, wages, debt, or childcare - it becomes harder to believe that a ballot paper will change anything. Each unmet promise, each crisis handled poorly, adds another layer to the belief that politics isn't working for people.

Yet another powerful factor shaping turnout is the emotional experience of exclusion. When political conversations, manifestos, and news coverage rarely reflect your life or priorities, it feels as if the democratic system was simply not designed with you in mind. From young people to lowincome parents, multiple recent studies show that many do not feel represented in politics, and this sense of invisibility feeds disengagement. Research with lowincome parents during the 2024 UK election period found that political rhetoric around benefits and welfare often felt pejorative and stigmatising, reinforcing feelings of marginalisation. When people hear themselves spoken about as problems, rather than as valued participants in democracy, it becomes emotionally harder to participate.

Despite all this, there is no inevitability to the turnout gap. And there are reasons for hope. Communitybased organising and voterengagement efforts consistently show that when people are supported, empowered, and given opportunities to connect political issues to their lived experiences, turnout gaps can shrink.

That is why initiatives like the Poverty Alliance's Vote Your Values campaign are so important. The campaign provides community groups across Scotland with practical, accessible resources to help people register to vote, understand why voting matters, and feel confident about taking part in elections. It builds on evidence showing that personal outreach and communityled getoutthevote initiatives can meaningfully reduce democratic deficits, particularly in areas with longstanding patterns of low participation.

Across Scotland, hundreds of grassroots organisations - food banks, tenants' unions, local charities, faith groups, and peersupport networks - are already trusted voices in their communities. They are well placed to have the conversations that cut through cynicism and make politics feel relevant again. But they cannot do it alone. Engaging people who face the greatest social and economic pressures takes time, resources, and sustained support. It requires funding for staff who can do outreach. Spaces where people can gather. Materials that are accessible and culturally appropriate. And partnerships that amplify the voices of communities too often treated as afterthoughts during elections. We have made a start, but we know that it is not enough.

Closing Scotland's turnout gap will not happen through messaging campaigns alone. It requires deeper action on the root causes of deprivation and inequality. It requires political leaders to follow through on commitments, listen closely to those most affected by policy decisions, and build institutions people feel they can trust again. But it also requires something more immediate and practical: investment in the people and organisations working every day to strengthen democracy from the ground up.
As Scotland approaches its next election cycle, we face a fundamental question about what kind of democracy we want to build. Do we accept a system where wealthier communities speak loudest and poorest communities are left unheard? Or do we invest - financially, politically, and emotionally - in ensuring that every voice matters? Because when voter participation is uneven, democracy becomes uneven too. Policies skew toward those who vote. Debates centre on those who are heard. And inequality deepens, feeding a cycle that is harder to break with each passing election.

We know what works. We know that community-led voter registration drives, supported by national organisations like the Poverty Alliance, can help pull down barriers and rebuild trust. We know that when people feel valued, listened to, and supported, they participate. And we know that Scotland is full of organisations ready to do this work - if they have the resources.

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