



# Safe and happy childhoods

**Investing in Scotland's children so they're  
free from harm, poverty, and vulnerability.**

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**A manifesto for the 2026 Scottish  
Parliamentary election.**



## The time for action is now

Action for Children is driven by love every day. We take action to achieve our vision – that **every child and young person in the country has a safe and happy childhood and the foundations they need to thrive**.

In Scotland, our team of over 820 people are working on the ground delivering around 90 services across 30 local authorities to give children and young people the protection and practical help they urgently need. Last year, we supported, loved and cared for more than 36,000 children, young people, and their families, which means we're experts in supporting families.

We believe it should be Scotland's national aim that no child or young person is in care. Instead, they would be living safely and happily with their birth parents and families. That's why we advocate for family support and early intervention services. However, we also recognise that there will still be times when residential and foster care is needed to meet children's needs when they can't live with their family. This provision must ensure that children and young people feel safe, loved and supported.

All these services should include a mix of providers to deliver them, including the third sector. As part of this delivery, Action for Children – like the wider sector – brings added value, such as experience, expertise, flexibility, innovation, partnerships and being viewed in communities as independent and non-judgmental.

We believe it's every government's responsibility to ensure the next generation of children has a better childhood than the last.

### **To achieve that progress, we need political parties to take action for children.**

At present, too many children face the devastating effects of poverty, are at risk of criminal exploitation, and lack access to vital family support. Whichever political party or parties form the next government, they will have to deliver on this responsibility. Likewise, opposition parties must scrutinise and challenge the government to ensure that responsibility is fulfilled.

With that in mind, we have provided a path of recommendations for politicians to help guide them to ensure more children have a safe and happy childhood with the foundations they need to thrive.

This manifesto offers a bold vision for Scotland's children. It highlights three areas based on Action for Children's core work and expertise. Each area identifies one goal and the actions needed to achieve it. To develop these policy calls, we sought the views of children and families and our staff by asking what matters to them ahead of the election.

In 2020, following the Independent Care Review, all parties represented in the Scottish Parliament agreed to '*keep the Promise*' that all Scotland's children and young people will grow up loved, safe and respected so they can realise their full potential. In essence, it represented a collective goal to make Scotland the best place in the world for children to grow up.



We want all parties to join us in taking action for children and creating a Scotland where every child thrives.

We call on all candidates and parties contesting the Scottish parliamentary election to support policies that tackle poverty, protect children experiencing or at risk of criminal exploitation, and strengthen families and communities.

**The time for action is now to make the 2026 Parliament the Promise Parliament.**

*Fiona Steel*

Fiona Steel – National Director for Scotland at Action for Children

# Safe

**The issue:** The criminal exploitation of children (CEC) is causing serious and preventable harm to children and young people across Scotland and the UK. This complex type of child abuse is where a young person is manipulated or pressured to take part in criminal activity.

In Action for Children's UK-wide polling, over 130,000 parents said their child had experienced three or more signs of criminal exploitation in the last 12 months.<sup>1</sup>

Our analysis of 179 serious safeguarding incidents related to our CEC services showed: 107 assaults were made against children, 59 of these involved a weapon, including knives, blades and acid. Fifty children were stabbed, some suffering life-altering injuries, and two young people were fatally stabbed.



**Our goal:** Protect vulnerable children from those seeking to exploit them. Build and develop stronger communities that promote positive youth engagement. And give young people a sense of belonging and safety with opportunities to grow and reach their potential.

*"I didn't know what was happening until it was too late. I thought I could handle it myself. I couldn't tell anyone what was happening, or I'd get locked up. The fear, the power, the money, getting caught, getting my family caught or being seen as a snake."*

Young person who was criminally exploited

## Driven by love, we can take action for children in the following ways:

- **Strengthen laws against criminal exploitation**, including the trafficking of children and gang recruitment. The Crime and Policing Bill is currently making its legislative journey at Westminster. We hope it will establish a new offence for criminally exploiting children, provide a legal definition of CEC and create prevention orders to sanction exploiters. If passed, we urge Scotland to extend these measures via a legislative consent motion. If not passed at Westminster, we would urge Holyrood to pass these measures.
- **Create a national strategy** aimed at tackling the exploitation of children, with awareness campaigns and early intervention as part of the strategy. Making better use of existing powers in Scotland – such as the use of the Children's Hearing System – can protect exploited children from unnecessary criminalisation.
- **Deliver a national rollout of contextual safeguarding** across all 32 local authorities – ensuring clarity around collective responsibility to address the harms that children and young people face outwith their families. A contextual safeguarding approach seeks to identify and respond to harm or abuse that young people experience outwith their family environment. It aims to disrupt these contexts rather than move young people away from them or displace the harms to other situations. Such contexts include peer groups, parks, transport hubs, schools and online.
- **Invest in more safe spaces for young people** where they are included, respected, and their needs understood. Unfortunately, youth clubs and other spaces dedicated to young people and local youth workers have declined over the years – we'd like to see this trend reversed. Local and national governments need to invest in safe, engaging spaces for young people that can be community assets to reduce opportunities for exploitation. Co-production should shape these investments, so they reflect young people's needs and wants. When young people have a say, they're more likely to feel ownership and responsibility and treat the spaces with respect. Councils are expected to spend 1% of their budget through participatory budgeting. This process needs to be genuine in including youth voices, enabling them to influence spending decisions, and providing young people with opportunities for growth and development.

# Happy

**The issue:** Poverty is a clear and present danger to realising the Promise. It creates a roadblock to children and young people realising their full potential. Put simply, child poverty and food insecurity are robbing children of their childhoods. Of Scotland's children, 23% live in poverty, that's 240,000 children.<sup>2</sup> Behind each statistic is a real child, with hopes and aspirations that poverty denies.

Families tell us that poverty limits their children's opportunities, choices and freedoms. Children living in poverty are more likely to have poor physical and mental health<sup>3</sup> and are less likely to achieve their potential at school and in employment.<sup>4</sup> But poverty is not inevitable; it is about political choices. Putting money into parents' pockets is a simple action we can take to reduce child poverty.



**Our goal:** Protect children from the impacts of poverty. Scotland therefore needs to meet its legal child poverty targets for reducing child poverty so that we can realise the Promise and enable children to reach their potential. Children should not have to worry about their family's finances.

## Driven by love, we can take action for children in the following ways:

- **Increase the Scottish Child Payment (SCP):** The Scottish Parliament's first budget should increase the SCP to £40 a week, then increase the SCP to £55 by the end of the parliament. This rise, alongside the ending of the two-child limit, could reduce relative child poverty by six percentage points in 2030-31, as cited by the Minimum Income Guarantee Expert Group.<sup>5</sup>
- **Make school meals a right:** The promise that primary pupils would receive school meals by 2022 was missed. We know that school meals and milk can eat into the budget of too many families and accessing 'free school meals' still carries a stigma. We need to reframe this to provide school meals as a right that all children can access. If we want children to have the best start, school meals should be a right for Scotland's children.
- **Publish a children's budget:** A children's budget is a tool to examine what resources the government is allocating to programmes that benefit children, and whether these programmes adequately reflect children's needs. A children's budget is a conscious and considered initiative that details the complete funding spent on and for children. Such spending is spread over different departments and portfolios, so no simple and clear way exists to evaluate the overall level of government investment in children. We'd like to change this.



*"I have no disposable income whatsoever. Things that were £1 are now £1.25 – a 25% increase. It was a struggle anyway, but now things are so much worse. There's no way we can survive like this – it's just impossible; we literally can't live. And my kids can't do anything fun."*

Mother of two

# Foundations



***If I didn't have family support... my family would have crumbled.***

Parent who received family support from Action for Children

***Being able to talk with someone who doesn't take sides...if my family didn't have that, we would have drifted apart and fought a lot more.***

Young person

**The issue:** The Promise stated: 'nurturing and supporting families to stay together will take far more than what Scotland currently provides'. Unfortunately, that remains the case, as last year, **11,844 children were 'looked after'**.<sup>6</sup> However, the right support at the right time can address a family's needs early and reduce risk factors that may lead to family breakdown.

Research shows family relationship breakdown remains the largest single cause of youth homelessness in Scotland, accounting for over half the total number of homelessness applications annually. **The most recent homelessness statistics show that, in Scotland, 22%<sup>7</sup> of homeless applications were from 15 to 24-year old young people.** That this cohort only makes up 12% of Scotland's population indicates young people are over-represented in homelessness statistics.

**We know that caring for a disabled child or young person can be challenging for Families.** The Scottish Health Survey 2021 estimates that 21% of children have a longstanding illness, and for young people over 16, it's 26%. Short breaks are vital; they provide families with a break from their caring responsibilities. This provision is often the key to helping families avoid breakdown.



**Our goal:** Families get the right support at the right time. Available when, where and for as long as they need it.

## Driven by love, we can take action for children in the following ways:

- Make family support a right that Scottish families can easily access:** Family support provides a shoulder to lean on, offering non-judgmental, practical and emotional support. Scotland needs a national strategy so that families can access the support they need. We recommend a fundamental redesign of existing structures and services, with the views and voices of families and young people at the heart. This redesign must ensure that a suite of providers can give families the broadest range of support, located within community hubs.
- Increase funding towards specialist and dedicated youth homelessness support:** Homelessness can leave a negative lasting impact on young people, affecting everything from their education and job prospects to their physical and mental health and wellbeing. We must ensure every young person has access to tailored support, starting with prevention and safe accommodation and extending to life skills, guidance and employability programmes. These services would give young people the skills, confidence, and opportunities they need to thrive in adult life.
- Extend the short breaks provision:** Then, families can access vital short breaks when they need them. Short breaks enable young people to experience new social and leisure activities within the community, offer them time with their peers, and provide them with a chance to develop relationships with others. They also give their families a break from their caring responsibilities.
- Commit to multiyear funding settlements:** Multiyear funding provides services with the security of long-term investment, enabling them to focus on changing lives for the long term rather than pursuing new funding streams. Adopting this approach will lead to more innovation within services because long-term stability provides the freedom, space and opportunity to experiment with new ideas and techniques, build capacity, and develop strategic partnerships. As well as security, it recognises the contributions of social care staff who provide high levels of compassion, empathy, commitment and kindness to ensure the people they care for feel they belong, are safe, loved and valued.

## References

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# Safe and happy childhood



Action for Children is driven by love. We take action so children don't miss out on a safe and happy childhood. We have thousands of people working on the ground, giving children and young people the protection and practical help they urgently need. And we campaign tirelessly for lasting change.

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