

# **Report of workshops with priority families in Scotland and their ideas to reduce child poverty**

**October 2024**

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# Summary

As part of its approach to the Commission's 2023-24 scrutiny of the Scottish Government's progress in reducing child poverty detailed in [our report published earlier this year](#), the Commission wanted to hear from parents and carers who were a member of the Scottish Government's 'priority family types'. These are household types who are at greater risk of poverty, and are:

- Lone parent families, the large majority of which are headed by women
- Families which include a disabled adult or child
- Larger families, with three or more children
- Minority ethnic families
- Families with a child under one year old
- Families where the mother is under 25 years of age

The Commission worked with eight organisations to organise workshop discussions and, in one case a survey, to gather participant views on:

- **What policies to reduce child poverty they were aware of**
- **How well they felt policies were working**
- **What else they felt was needed to reduce child poverty**

In total 111 participants were involved in these workshops, with 21 participating in the survey. Many of the participants were members of more than one priority family type, and so may have experience of multiple overlapping challenges. While the Commission aimed to ensure that workshops included parents from across all priority family types, some experiences have come across more strongly than others (for example, there was particularly strong representation from asylum seeking and refugee parents, but no workshop that specifically explored the experiences of disabled parents or carers).

In the Commission's 2023-24 scrutiny report we reported on some of the findings from these workshops and made the recommendation that the Scottish Government "review the evidence and ideas from parents" raised in these workshops and consider what further action it can take on them. We are publishing this fuller report of the workshops along with the ideas for change that arose from them in order to assist with this aim.

This report summarises the views of participants on the three topics above, further organised by the three 'drivers of poverty' commonly used by the Scottish Government (income from social security, income from employment, and the costs of living), and other issues raised by participants that were important to them.

The Commission is very grateful to all the participants in our workshops who took time to discuss these issues, and the organisations who we worked with to arrange them.

## **Participants told the Commission that...**

### **On social security:**

- Parents and carers from across the priority family types highlighted continuing challenges in knowing and understanding their benefit entitlement, and how to apply to access that entitlement. This was not universal and some participants found processes easier to understand and more straightforward.
- Reasons for difficulties experienced included lack of knowledge about entitlement, not knowing where to go to for support to make a claim, language and communications issues, and problems in online access.
- These difficulties were particularly experienced by some groups such as minority ethnic parents, and those who were asylum seekers or had No Recourse to Public Funds. Support organisations who assisted participants to understand their entitlement and then go on to claim it were often spoken about positively.
- Some devolved benefits, such as the Scottish Child Payment were generally spoken about positively and appreciated by participants.
- Some participants who had immigration statuses that limited their entitlement to support felt strongly that the lack of eligibility for devolved benefits such as the Scottish Child Payment was discriminatory, as it treats some children living in Scotland, some of whom were born in Scotland, differently to others.

### **On increasing income from employment:**

- Parents and carers talked about the challenges of balancing paid work and family responsibilities, particularly being the case for single parents and parents with disabled children.
- Views about policies intended to support people to enter and progress in work varied. For example, some single parents talked about how they wanted to get support to increase their confidence and put their skills to use in the workplace and to challenge the notion held by society that single parents didn't want to work. However, some participants in a workshop with black and minority ethnic women took the view that women with children being 'pushed' into employment was not good for children and mothers, and therefore not good for tackling poverty.
- For single parent participants and those caring for a disabled child, flexibility and understanding was seen as important, given the stresses and challenges of combining employment with caring responsibilities.
- Lack of suitable and affordable childcare was identified as a major barrier to employment by participants across different workshops.
- Awareness of employability support was mixed, and particularly limited in one workshop with black and minority ethnic women, where most participants did not know where to go for employability support. Some groups, such as single parents,

were aware of local support but also felt it was not set up to take into account the needs and barriers experienced by single parents.

- Refugee and asylum-seeking parents cited incidences of experiencing discrimination in their attempts to enter the workplace, including discrimination based on their name or accent during the application process.

### **On the cost of living:**

- The impact of and difficulties caused by the high costs of living were raised repeatedly across the workshops. This was particularly the case for parents of a disabled child who described how their additional disability-related benefits – intended to cover the additional costs of the disability – were instead used to pay for essentials like food or energy. High energy costs came up in most of the workshops, with the mitigation offered by energy price caps being described as insufficient for low-income families.
- Housing costs were also a recurring theme, including concerns about the availability, cost and quality of housing, along with rent arrears. For some groups of participants in temporary accommodation there were particular difficulties in accessing suitable accommodation for families with children.
- Transport costs were raised as an issue, with the expensive nature of bus travel being raised as a barrier, though the free bus travel entitlement for children and young people was welcomed and many participants were aware of it.
- There was generally high awareness amongst participants of support that is provided for school-related costs (e.g. clothing grants and free school meals), though participants in some workshops for black and minority ethnic women and refugees and asylum seekers had less knowledge about support available and their entitlement.
- Digital connectivity was a further concern, with participants raising that, as so much information is online, some families on low incomes do not have the internet access or skills to take advantage of this.

### **On other issues that were important to them:**

- It was clear from the workshops that some participants had persistent experiences of discrimination when interacting with services or employers. This could be at the policy level (e.g. lower levels of some benefits for young parents or the two-child limit), or the feeling of being kept waiting and ignored when interacting with universal services who, participants felt, did not fully understand their circumstances.
- Access to play and activities for children was seen as important across many of the workshops, and the impact that poverty has on restrictions on play (e.g. in terms of lack of gardens and poor quality public outdoor spaces) was seen as limiting the opportunities for children, particularly when travelling to affordable play and activities was put out of reach by high transport costs.
- The role of education to improve life chances was raised in a number of workshops, and was particularly a concern for the parents of disabled children and those with

additional needs. Pandemic educational disruption was still an issue for the parents of some children, as they felt that schools were not able to keep with the demand for additional support for the larger number of pupils who were struggling.

- Throughout our workshops, it was clear that participants highly valued the support they received from third sector and community organisations, including those running the workshops, which they saw as having an important role in filling the gaps in state assistance. However, some participants felt their reliance on third sector organisations was unsustainable and not the way things should be in the long-term.

Contained within what participants told the Commission are numerous observations and suggestions. As participants were from diverse backgrounds and had a range of perspectives on child poverty, there was not consensus on every issue. However, the Commission has summarised what appears to it to be some of the main suggestions and ideas coming from the workshops that it believes are important for policy-makers to consider.

## **Ideas for change from our workshop participants**

### **On raising incomes from social security, participants suggested:**

- Improving the availability, accessibility and consistency of information available to parents. This includes:
  - Providing access to information through universal services, such as schools, nurseries, GPs, health visitors and libraries
  - Providing information at different stages of children's development
  - Providing information at points of change or transition, such as when a disabled child receives a diagnosis, when parents' immigration status changed etc
  - Making particular efforts to engage with those who face language barriers, including making information available in translation and in person
- Funding support groups and charities to promote benefit entitlement, as these were the main source of information for many families.
- Specific support for people with different immigration statuses, to make sure their children got the benefits they were entitled to. Suggestions included:
  - a comprehensive website with information and resources for people with different immigration statuses about what was available and eligibility
  - providing multilingual resources
  - collaborations with community networks, community organisations, local authorities and service providers
  - awareness raising campaigns using various platforms
- Automation of benefits so that families got them automatically if entitled.
- Having a minimum level of financial support that people should not be below.
- Suggestions on specific benefits, including:

- Removing age restrictions from the young carers payment so carers under the age of 16 could benefit
- Giving everyone receiving low-income benefits the winter heating payment
- Scottish Government should lobby the UK Government to remove the two-child limit and benefit cap, and call for equal Universal Credit payments for those aged under 25.

**On raising income from employment, participants suggested:**

- A need for more flexible work that enabled parents to balance parenting and employment.
- A need for more understanding from employers about caring responsibilities, particularly for single parents and parents of disabled children.
- Flexible, affordable childcare was needed, including childcare that met the needs of disabled children. Some parents suggested this was needed from birth.
- Free holiday activities and food programmes should be expanded.
- More support to enable parents to enter higher education.
- More apprenticeship opportunities to allow parents to gain work experience.

It should be noted that not all families are of the view that dual earning households are a desirable outcome for children.

**On reducing household costs, participants suggested:**

- Action to support families with school uniform. Ideas included:
  - More than one school clothing grant per year to allow for children growing out of clothes
  - Discretion to help families just over the cut-off point to qualify for the school clothing grant, particularly those with multiple children at school
  - Providing school clothing at no cost for all children
  - Making it mandatory for school and nurseries to make parents aware they could get a school clothing grant
  - Automating the school clothing grant
- Expanding access to free school meals to all families, for example to all families on Universal Credit, and writing off all existing school meal debt.
- More help with energy bills. Ideas included:
  - More support from energy companies
  - Giving everyone receiving low-income benefits the Winter Heating Payment
  - Targeted subsidies for low-income households
- Support with costs and training to access to the internet



- Additional support for asylum seekers with transport and food costs. Ideas included:
  - Support with bus fares and train tickets
  - A bus card to allow parents to take children to activities
  - Food vouchers, or, if that was not an option, giving money to organisations that could support asylum seekers to buy food that is culturally appropriate

# 1. Introduction

The Poverty and Inequality Commission undertakes annual scrutiny of the progress that Scottish Government has made towards meeting [Scotland's statutory child poverty targets](#), and sets out what more the Commission thinks is needed.

The Commission published its most recent [scrutiny report for the 2023-24 period](#) in June 2024, which looked at the Scottish Government's 'priority family types'. These are the six family types at higher risk of poverty, and collectively around 90% of children in poverty are in households from at least one priority family type.

These priority family types are:

- Lone parent families, the large majority of which are headed by women
- Families which include a disabled adult or child
- Larger families, with three or more children
- Minority ethnic families
- Families with a child under one year old
- Families where the mother is under 25 years of age

As part of its approach to the Commission's 2023-24 scrutiny, the Commission wanted to include the views and suggestions of parents and carers from the priority family types. We wanted to get their views and ideas on:

- **What policies to reduce child poverty they were aware of**
- **How well they felt policies were working**
- **What else they felt was needed to reduce child poverty**

To do this, the Commission worked with organisations who worked directly with parents and carers from these priority family types.

## Who the Commission heard from

The Commission worked with eight organisations who themselves work with or support people from the priority family types. The Commission asked the organisations to organise a set of workshop discussions, and in one case a survey, to gather the views of people from priority family types they worked with.

The organisations worked with people that included lone parents, parents with disabled children, minority ethnic parents, refugee and asylum seeking parents, young parents, and parents with babies under the age of one.

The Commission provided prompt questions and supporting materials about child poverty policy for participating organisations. Because each organisation was set up differently and so worked with people in different ways appropriate to their client relationship, the format and facilitation of the workshops was determined by organisations themselves, with support provided as needed by the Commission.

Seven of the organisations we worked with ran eight workshop discussions, collectively these involved 111 participants in total. One organisation decided that the best way to get views from the people they worked with was through a survey, and this survey received 21 responses.

The Commission aimed to make sure that the workshop discussions and survey overall included parents from across the priority family types. Frequently parents belonged to more than one priority family type, and as a result may have experience of compounding barriers as a result.<sup>1</sup> Parents and carers were encouraged to share their views on child poverty policy as a whole, not just in relation to any one characteristic.

While the Commission aimed to ensure that workshops as a whole included parents from across all priority family types, some experiences have come out more strongly than others, and some experiences are absent. In particular there was no workshop that specifically highlighted the experiences of disabled parents (while there was a workshop that focused on the experience of parents and carers of disabled children).

There was also strong representation across multiple workshops from asylum seeking and refugee parents. Asylum seekers and those with No Recourse to Public Funds are not eligible to benefit from many policies intended to reduce child poverty (and many of the policies that affect them the most are reserved to the UK Government and so the Scottish Government has more limited opportunities for intervention). Hence awareness of some policies to reduce poverty may be lower among this group. However, these are also groups who can experience the most severe poverty and destitution, so the Commission believes it is important to have this voice and collective experience represented strongly in this report and its ideas for change.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This is consistent with representative survey data on the intersections between priority family types, where children in poverty who are a member of one priority family group are also more likely than not to be a member of at least one other group. See the [Commission's 2023-24 scrutiny report](#) for a further discussion of this (page 25).

<sup>2</sup> For further information on this issue, the Scottish Government published an evidence summary on barriers and what works in supporting asylum seekers and refugees earlier this year: [Tackling child poverty - progress report 2023-2024: annex B - focus report on other marginalised groups at risk of poverty - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

## This report and its ideas for change

Some of the messages for policy-makers emerging from these workshop discussions have been published previously by the Commission in a chapter of its 2023-24 scrutiny of Child Poverty Delivery Plan progress. They helped inform the Commission's four recommendations to the Scottish Government contained in this previously-published report.

The Commission's principles outlined in [our Strategic Plan](#) describe how our principles commit us to amplify the voices of those who are not often heard, and to use the Commission's platform to share the views and solutions of people who have experience of poverty. Because of this the Commission wanted to publish in a fuller form, this report which contains a more detailed description of the views and insights of the participants, whose time and expertise the Commission is very grateful for.

This report is structured broadly around the three drivers of poverty<sup>3</sup>, which are:

1. Incomes from social security
2. Incomes from employment
3. Household costs

It also provides some additional comment from participants on other issues they felt important in reducing child poverty, but that do not readily fit into one of the three drivers above.

One of the Commission's recommendations contained in its 2023-24 scrutiny of Child Poverty Delivery Plan progress is for the Scottish Government to "review the evidence and ideas from parents" raised by these workshops and consider what further action it can take in response. The Commission hopes that publishing this report of the workshops will help the Scottish Government to do this.

This report ends with ideas for change from workshop participants. The Commission hopes we have been able to do their ideas justice and we have not lost too many important points in the process of summarising them.

The Commission is very grateful to all the participants in our workshops who took the time to discuss these issues with us, and the organisations who we worked with, who were:

- Amina – The Muslim Women's Resource Centre
- Amma Birth Companions
- BEMIS

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<sup>3</sup> The Scottish Government's second Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan provides a further explanation of how it views these three drivers of poverty: [Tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022-2026 - annex 3: child poverty measurement framework – updated - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

- Contact
- Fife Gingerbread
- Front Lounge
- Migrants Organising for Rights and Empowerment (MORE)
- One Parent Families Scotland

## 2. What did poverty mean to parents in our workshops and how aware were they of Scottish Government actions to tackle child poverty?

### 2.1 What did poverty mean to participants?

Some of the workshops started by asking parents about what poverty meant to them. Some of the themes from what parents said in response to this included:

- Being unable to meet your financial and day to day needs
- Limiting your participation in society
- Leading to financial debt
- Creating limited expectations and being unable to afford things you need to do
- Unsuitable housing, particularly if disabled
- The environment where they lived
- Affecting your mental health, which can in turn impact on how you can look after your children
- Affecting access to education
- Choosing between food and electricity or gas, and having to put on extra clothes to keep warm
- Poverty affects culture and sense of community, for example, not able to afford to cook for groups of people, or not being able to afford to buy food they would usually eat
- Limiting choices
- Forcing parents to be 'economical with the truth' with their children as they try to say they'll be able to do things, or afford things, in the future
- Causing children to feel inferior and lose confidence
- Is used as a weapon for discrimination, especially in school

Parents described being unable to afford days out and missing out on experiences. They described how poverty can limit options when it comes to making healthy choices such as diet. Parents talked about feeling trapped in poverty and facing stigma. Some parents described isolation and a generational poverty trap, such as in the quote below from a workshop participant.

***“Kids are in the same trap as their parents. Especially growing up in poverty in certain areas. We need to stop the cycle.”***

Despite the challenges and stigma, one of the workshops with single parents highlighted that participants had positive hopes and dreams, focused around work and education. They felt it was not a lack of motivation, but actually the systems that should support families that were holding them back.

In one workshop with refugees, parents expressed scepticism about the effectiveness of the actions taken by the Scottish Government in reducing child poverty. They highlighted concerns about the adequacy of support measures and the challenges faced by families in accessing benefits and support services.

***“I’m not sure if these actions will be enough. It’s a step in the right direction, but there’s still a lot more that needs to be done in tackling child poverty.”***

In one workshop with asylum seekers there seemed to be large gaps in the knowledge and awareness of participants on actions the Scottish Government is taking to reduce child poverty.

## **2.2 What did parents and carers tell us about their experiences and views in relation to social security?**

Social security was the predominant issue discussed in most of the eight workshops with parents and carers. Of all the action being taken to tackle child poverty this was the most visible and had the most direct impact on participants.

### **2.2.1 Awareness of social security benefits and how to apply**

Parents and carers across all groups highlighted challenges in knowing what benefits were available and what they were entitled to. This was particularly the case for parents and carers from minority ethnic groups, and especially those who faced language barriers, or who were asylum seekers, or had No Recourse to Public Funds.

Across all parents and carers, the Scottish Child Payment appeared to be the most well-known of the Social Security Scotland benefits and the best understood anti-poverty action. It was also generally spoken about positively. One single parent said:

***“The Scottish Child Payment has helped so much. I have 3 children and felt like I was moving from one money crisis to the next. Now that I get a payment for my older son as well it’s been a bit of a lifesaver. I still struggle don’t get me wrong but if it wasn’t there well I’d be in really bad debt.”***

There was still some variation in knowledge about the Scottish Child Payment across the workshops. In the two workshops run by organisations working with single parents, all the parents and carers were aware of the Scottish Child Payment. However, in the workshops run with parents with disabled children and with minority ethnic parents, including refugees and asylum seekers, there were lower levels of apparent awareness. One parent said:

***“The first time I heard about the Scottish Child Payment was from Amina, and it felt like a bonus, like an extra, since I know about child benefit but not Scottish Child Payment and I didn’t know why it was there. It’s a shame they don’t backdate because I didn’t know about it for a long time, I thought it was child benefit and missed out.”***



There were fairly high levels of awareness of Best Start Grant and Best Start Foods, with similar patterns of awareness between workshops. Amongst parents and carers with a disabled child the benefits they were most likely to be aware of were Child Disability Payment and Carers Allowance.

The view that the benefits system was unfair and discriminatory towards some children in Scotland came up at a number of workshops. Children from asylum-seeking families or those with No Recourse to Public Funds are not eligible for the Scottish Child Payment, or, in the vast majority of cases, the other family payments, such as the Best Start Grants and Best Start Foods. Across a number of the workshops this was perceived as discriminatory, as it treats some children living in Scotland, some of whom were born in Scotland, differently to others. In relation to this one participant said:

***“Child poverty does not look at your immigration status or your skin colour, Best Start Food grant and Best Start Food should be for all children.”***

The two child limit for Universal Credit, and age discrimination in Universal Credit, with parents under the age of 25 receiving lower levels of benefits, were also highlighted as treating some children differently.

### **2.2.2 Accessing benefits**

In some workshops, there was confusion and sometimes fear around eligibility for benefits. In one workshop with parents from minority ethnic groups, past experiences with tax credits had left parents worried about having to pay back benefits and ending up in debt.

Parents with disabled children were a group who appeared to find it difficult to know what they were eligible for. One parent spoke about their child missing out for years because they did not know about Disability Living Allowance. Other parents agreed that they had not been aware of this benefit for a long time. Parents from minority ethnic groups with a disabled child reported that they struggled in particular to find information and access financial support. Across many of the workshops the issue of language barriers was raised for those whose first language was not English. Language barriers may be particularly acute when applying for disability-related payments. One participant said:

***“Because we may not use the right word or explain the condition our child has which is like living with a time bomb, and yet we don’t get support.”***

Many parents from minority ethnic backgrounds described experiences of being ignored, kept waiting and not hearing back from universal services, not being given social work support, and experiencing long waiting times for assessments.

Parents described challenges completing the Child Disability Payment form as it is a long form with complicated questions, and they did not know how to ‘navigate’ the completion of the form for some severe health conditions. Some single parents found it particularly challenging as they were already trying to do everything, without any support.

Waiting times for assessments and diagnosis of conditions was also identified as an issue, and in this period many families believe that they do not qualify for any support or benefits. This is why many parents thought they had missed on benefits and entitlements over the years. Some parents felt that the pressures of trying to care for their child and work while waiting led to tensions in families and relationship breakdowns.

The way benefits link together with some being reliant on others as qualifying criteria was also raised as an issue: for example, if families didn’t get the Child Disability Payment this meant they were then not eligible for other forms of support, such as Family Fund grants or the Take a Break short breaks fund.

There was also some confusion about the different rules for different benefits, depending on whether they were administered by Social Security Scotland or the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The issue of the DWP two-child limit came up in some of the workshops with lone parents and parents of disabled children, with some participants saying people aren’t always aware that this doesn’t apply to Scottish benefits like the Scottish Child Payment.

For parents and carers who are asylum seekers or have No Recourse to Public Funds, entitlement to any support is particularly complicated. Some participants with No Recourse to Public Funds talked about receiving well-meant advice or referrals from non-specialists (e.g. from midwives) which turned out to be incorrect or not applicable to them. This made it difficult for them to have confidence in any guidance they received. Some were even fearful about accessing any support at all, citing examples where people had unknowingly accessed public funds, which later prevented them from obtaining indefinite leave to remain. On this, a participant said:

***“It’s hard to know where to get correct information. There’s a lot of confusion about eligibility and processes, which makes it difficult to access the support we need.”***

Another said:

***“I felt so frustrated after completing forms only to be told that if you are in the asylum system you don’t qualify for those benefits. They should have asked for immigration status first before raising my hopes high.”***

Refugees are entitled to benefits, but refugee participants in some of the workshops highlighted difficulties accessing information and support due to language barriers and complex application processes. Some parents and carers referred to ‘information overload’ on getting refugee status meaning that information isn’t taken in. Participants reported that despite efforts by some service providers to offer guidance, many individuals still felt overwhelmed and uncertain about how to navigate the system effectively. There were different experiences amongst refugee participants in the workshops. One participant said:

***“There was no communication after gaining refugee status, leading to no support and child poverty.”***

Some participants said that lack of awareness, language barriers, confusing application processes and unclear eligibility criteria, all led to delays in them receiving benefits after getting their refugee status. This could create a gap between asylum support and accessing benefits. Others said that they received help to understand what was available and to apply, particularly from the Scottish Refugee Council.

Refugee participants highlighted disparities in access to support, with some individuals receiving comprehensive support, while others faced barriers due to language proficiency or lack of information. One participant said:

***“Why is it straightforward for some people and elusive for others?...  
Inequalities and inconsistencies in support need to be addressed.”***

In some workshops parents and carers said that they had found the workshops themselves useful because they had found out about things that they might be entitled to through them. A refugee parent said that this was the first time she had heard about benefits that were available to her three children. In another workshop a parent from a minority ethnic background with a disabled child said:

***“If I hadn’t attended this session, I would not have known about most of the things that was talked about tonight.”***

The survey, which included young parents and parents with children in an afterschool club run by the organisation, found that survey participants faced a range of access issues. These included not knowing about entitlement, unclear and sometimes unrealistic guidelines on eligibility, not knowing where to get support to make a claim, difficulties getting in touch by phone and personal access issues, such as struggles using the internet and dyslexia.

While many parents across the workshops described benefit application processes in general as confusing and difficult, this wasn’t universal. One parent from a minority ethnic background, who was supported by the organisation running the workshop to apply for the Scottish Child Payment said:

***“I think Scottish Child Payment was easy to apply for with the support of yourself, it was a breath of fresh air, it didn’t feel like you had to provide so much, felt like a bonus and more supported, didn’t have to send anything in. That was easy because you signposted me and it was easy.”***

Some parents liked being able to apply online, for example:

***“My experience was smooth. Navigate system, don’t need to meet or interact, just upload info, if you’re eligible it will be accepted. It’s much easier at my own pace online, the moment you submit the application.”***

Some single parents said that once they were aware of the benefits it was easy to apply for them:

***“Once I heard about the benefits it was easily accessible.”***

***“I feel they are easily accessed online instead of waiting hours on the phone to speak to a real person.”***

Lone parents in some of the workshops talked about being ‘talked down to’, and feelings of being judged and discriminated against by Job Centre Plus.

Parents in a number of workshops highlighted links between the benefits system and mental health. Mental health difficulties could make it difficult to navigate the system, but the complexities of the system were also seen as having a direct impact on people’s mental health, making it even harder to access the system. In one workshop with minority ethnic parents, it was suggested that the emotional impact from application and appeals processes can transfer into anger, distress, sadness, or depression and this can have an impact on children. The need for support to navigate the system then becomes really important to those affected in this way. Parents in another workshop said:

***“Sometimes I feel like crying, and when I ask the government, they are not helping that much. It is good when they give someone to help when certain people are struggling, as it is hard to explain repeatedly our crisis. It makes our mental situation worse.”***

***“I am under stress and some things that are easy become complicated. I need someone to help me when there are so many things in my mind.”***

### **2.2.3 Where did parents get information about benefits and entitlement?**

Parents and carers reported getting information from a range of sources. Hearing about benefits from other parents or family members was particularly common amongst single parents and parents of disabled children. In the workshop with parents of disabled children, many parents said they only found out what they were eligible for from other parents, or by attending talks put on by support groups and charities.

One parent noted that the downside of getting information about entitlement and applying for benefits from other parents is that where those parents have experienced problems this can put others off applying, perhaps due to some of the negative consequences described in the previous section.

Other places and people that parents mentioned included the Job Centre and careers centres, health professionals, nurseries, community links workers, local authorities, and seeing information online and on social media. In some workshops parents were asked specifically about the Scottish Government’s [cost of living support website](#) and in at least two of the workshops no parents had heard about it.

Parents in some of the workshops mentioned getting information and advice from Citizens Advice Bureau and Money Matters. While some parents found face to face support really helpful to understand their entitlement and to apply, others liked being able to apply online.

In one of the workshops with minority ethnic parents, parents felt that access to information about Scottish social security benefits such as Scottish Child Payment and the other family payments was better for those with very young children, as there were various points – through the hospital, health visitors, nurseries – where they might get information about entitlement. Those who became entitled to benefits when their children were older, either through new benefits, change in personal circumstances, or change in immigration status, were apparently less likely to report receiving information.

In a similar way to that discussed in the previous section, some parents expressed particular frustrations about inconsistent advice and limited support available for individuals with immigration statuses that limited their access to benefits.

At transition or crisis points it can be particularly difficult for parents to understand what they may be entitled to. Participants described how these can include at the time of relationship

breakdowns, at the point of diagnosis or assessment for disabled children and adults, at transition from child to adult services, or when people transition from the asylum process to achieving refugee status. One parent from a workshop with minority ethnic parents said:

***“Some of the women are struggling because they have recently come to the UK. But I am born here and lived here all my life, but I’ve never heard about these benefits, and I think it’s because I never had to access it, only after separation.”***

Another said:

***“Even if it’s easy, when the situation changes and you must start from scratch. Even if you are good at the computer, everything collapses and you need someone to help you find the way and support you.”***

Another participant had navigated access to benefits at the point they received their refugee status, with the help of the Scottish Refugee Council, but then later became disabled and found that information wasn’t readily available about entitlements to benefits and support.

The need for information at the point of diagnosis or assessment was emphasised by parents of disabled children, as well as at transition to adult services. One parent of a disabled young person described how, when their young person left school, none of the services they were involved with had informed them that they were entitled to Universal Credit.

The Scottish Refugee Council was again mentioned by a number of those with refugee status as an important source of information and support when they received refugee status. Some people had been allocated a case worker who was able to advise them. However, not all refugees seemed aware of this potential source of support. There was a sense that access to benefits and whether you were treated with dignity depended on who your advocate was and on the support groups that you had access to.

#### **2.2.4 The adequacy of benefits**

Parents in some of the workshops commented on the extent to which the benefits they were entitled to were meeting their needs.

Some parents caring for one or more disabled child said that they received Carers Allowance, but felt it did not 'touch the sides' when it came to support parents financially as unpaid carers. Another felt that the Carers Allowance amount should take into account situations where parents were caring for more than one child.

Parents said how important the Child Disability Payment is to families to be able to afford additional or special clothing due to sensory needs, and special food. They said that mostly it helps pay rising costs of living expenses on food, electricity bills and heating bills. Parents are often told by professionals what they should be using Child Disability Payment for, and one participant was concerned that they were told they should be keeping receipts for future applications for other benefits.

Parents generally welcomed the Scottish Child Payment, with some saying £100 for each child every four weeks made a real difference, especially for larger families. Others raised the issue that they felt everything became more expensive when children became teenagers, but the amount did not change and ultimately stops at age sixteen.

Refugee parents highlighted the inadequacy of benefits such as Universal Credit and Scottish Child Payment in addressing the broader challenges faced by families on low incomes – high living costs, lack of adequate support, and delays in accessing benefits.

For asylum seekers the issue of sufficiency of benefits is particularly acute. From January 2024, asylum seekers usually receive a weekly payment of £49.18 per person in the household from the UK Government. This is reduced to £8.86 if meals are provided with accommodation. Parents described the hardships of budgeting such a small weekly allowance and that many were left with no money after buying food, so were forced to stay at home most of the time because they could not pay for buses or for any activities with their children. This left them feeling excluded from Scottish society. In one workshop it was noted that financial difficulties were particularly acute for disabled asylum seekers, or asylum seekers with disabled children who might face additional costs but weren't entitled to any disability benefits.

## **2.2.5 What more did parents think was needed in relation to social security?**

### Access to information and support

The importance of knowing what you were entitled to, and making this information accessible, was a strong message coming from all the workshops. Access to information through universal services, such as schools, nurseries, GPs, health visitors and libraries was seen as important, as well as through the Jobcentre. The need for information to be shared at various stages of children's development, not just at birth was emphasised. Parents with a disabled child particularly highlighted the point of diagnosis or assessment as key point where parents needed to be informed about relevant benefits.



Ideas for helping families know what they were entitled to included producing information for professionals to share with families they meet and support at health and education services, having a central point to provide support to families – some called it a ‘one stop shop’. The main source of information for many parents was support groups and other charities, and some parents felt that these groups should be given funding to help them promote benefit entitlement. The need for information to be available in translation, in writing and in person, was emphasised as a way of overcoming the additional language barriers some minority ethnic parents face.

Given the complexity of entitlement for people with different immigration statuses, some groups identified the need for specific support for people achieving refugee status/leave to remain/ permanent leave to remain, to make sure that their children got the benefits they were entitled to. Participants in some of the workshops recommended improving outreach strategies, including utilising community networks, providing multilingual resources, and collaborating with service providers. Participants suggested there was need for comprehensive awareness campaigns, using various platforms, including online resources, workshops and collaborations with local authorities and community organisations.

It was suggested that a comprehensive website with relevant information and resources for people with different immigration statuses would be very helpful to understand what was available and eligibility.

Automation of benefits, so that families got them automatically if they were entitled, was raised in some workshops. For example, some parents felt that Child Disability Payment, and associated support, should be automatically awarded at diagnosis or assessment.

### Eligibility and adequacy of benefits

Some parents said that they wanted the Scottish Government to increase levels of benefits as they felt they were too low. The need for financial stability was emphasised, with single parents in one workshop saying that instability of income impacts families’ ability to meet basic needs. In another workshop a single parent said there should be a minimum level of financial support that people should not be below.

Some suggestions were made in relation to specific benefits. It was suggested that age restrictions should be removed from the young carer payment so that young carers under the age of 16 could benefit. Another suggestion was to give everyone on benefits the winter heating payment.

There were also suggestions that the Scottish Government should lobby the UK Government for changes to UK benefits and mitigate some of the UK Government’s decisions. This included compensating for the reduction in Universal Credit for parents

under 25, reducing the impact of the benefit cap,<sup>4</sup> and lobbying the UK Government to get rid of the two-child limit.

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<sup>4</sup> The Scottish Government has provided funding to local authorities to mitigate the impact of the benefit cap through the Discretionary Housing Payments scheme. None of the parents in our workshops mentioned this.

## **2.3 What did parents and carers tell us about their experiences and views in relation to increasing income from employment?**

The eight workshops included a mix of participants who were in full or part-time paid employment, who were carers, who were in education or training, and those who were unemployed. They also included some participants who were unable to work because of their immigration status.

### **2.3.1 Views about paid work**

Many of the participants in the workshops who were not in paid work said they were keen to work if they were able to. One of the workshops with single parents explored participants' aspirations for the future, and found that these focused around work and employment. These single parents felt that many people assumed that they didn't want to work and they got treated badly because of this. They wanted to develop the confidence to put their skills into action.

In one workshop with black and minority ethnic women, however, some of the participants took the view that women with children being pushed into employment was not good for children and mothers and therefore not good for tackling child poverty. It was suggested that it put a strain on family life, with children not getting enough attention. Some of these participants took a view that men were breadwinners and women were nurturers. It was suggested that practicing the Muslim faith was hard because of different expectations and standards around nurturing and bringing up families than general expectations and standards in the UK.

Some of these participants considered that being torn between being a breadwinner and a mother could cause mental health issues for mothers, that then impacted on children. It was suggested that there was too much pressure on mothers to get a job. But some of the participants in this workshop did think mothers should have the flexibility to be able to be a mother and to work.

Some asylum seeking parents said they wanted to work while holding asylum status in order to provide for their children, but were not able to due to the restrictions.

### **2.3.2 Balancing work and family responsibilities**

Participants in the workshops talked about the challenges of balancing paid work and family responsibilities. This was particular the case for single parents and parents with disabled children. Single parents described struggling to find flexible work that met their child's

needs. The need for more flexible work and more understanding from employers about the challenges and stresses of combining employment with caring responsibilities was highlighted. One single parent said:

***“I think the world of employment needs to change. More flexibility...and not just working from home by the way! Could people recognise that part-time does not mean part-trained or only junior levels.”***

In one of the workshops with black and minority ethnic women, participants raised concerns about the jobs that were available to them. The types of jobs available were seen as not helping women’s development and participants said that the information on job descriptions was sometimes misleading. It was perceived that any flexibility tended to favour the employer, not the employee.

Parents with disabled children said that they faced additional challenges in balancing paid work and caring responsibilities. This included additional demands, such as managing and attending assessments and meetings, and completing forms. It was particularly the case where schools were not able to meet their children’s needs. Some participants described having to reduce their working hours, or leave their jobs, because their child was only attending school for two hours a day, and the parent then had to pick them up and look after them. Many parents with disabled children are also single parents, with no-one to share these responsibilities. In-work poverty was considered a major factor for families with a disabled child.

Parents and carers with No Recourse to Public Funds face very specific pressures and precarity in relation to employment as they are not entitled to benefits and are generally reliant on employment income. Participants described how many employers ask for one year of work experience in the UK and this can put people in a desperate situation, feeling as if they have no choice but to accept any offer of employment, even if they are overqualified. Many participants also talked about being unable to take maternity leave or even call in sick without fear of being let go from their jobs.

### **2.3.3 Childcare**

Lack of suitable and affordable childcare was identified as a major barrier to employment by participants across the different workshops. It was a particular issue for single parents, and in one of the workshops it was suggested that the system didn’t work for families who were isolated with no friends/family support and who had to rely on childcare available. Some

single parents identified a lack of childcare availability, either in terms of suitable services within the local area, or available places for children. Parents felt trapped in poverty by this.

Single parents in another workshop felt that childcare had improved, but that more needed to be done in relation to flexibility and affordability. One participant said that there needed to be:

***“More flexibility in how we use free hours at council nurseries. I need to pay to top up extra childcare to fit with my working hours.”***

Lack of suitable childcare for children with additional needs was raised as a particular barrier. Many parents of disabled children were also single parents without a wider support network to rely on for childcare. Parents with disabled children gave examples of childcare provision refusing to take their child because they couldn't deal with the child's needs. Others described having to pay extra for a childminder to ensure their child's needs are met at childcare, and that their health plan is being carried out. One parent said that there needed to be:

***“Understanding that children with additional needs have no provision or support and putting more funding in place to help support parents so they can earn and get much needed respite.”***

Lack of affordable and accessible childcare options were also identified as a significant challenge amongst parents with No Recourse to Public Funds, who are reliant on employment for their income. One participant said:

***“Paying for childcare is really expensive and there's just not enough available spaces. It's a real problem for many families.”***

#### **2.3.4 Employability support**

There was a mixed picture when it came to awareness of employability support. In one workshop with black and minority ethnic women, most did not know where to go for

employability support, although some mentioned their council, the DWP, and websites. In another workshop with black and minority ethnic parents and carers, employment support interventions were described as patchy and confusing. However, one participant did describe getting helpful support in re-accessing the workplace from an employment officer at the Job Centre.

In a workshop with single parents, most participants were aware of local employability initiatives around help into work, but felt they were often not set up to take account of the specific needs and barriers experienced by single parents. The difficulties of balancing parenting and caring responsibilities with employment came up repeatedly. One participant suggested that there needed to be:

***“More employability schemes supporting single parents who are also carers to be able to work part-time for their wellbeing to balance parental, caring role with a possibility of developing in other aspects of one’s life.”***

One of the organisations running a workshop provided employability support to single parents, and a participant in that workshop said the employment support made “you feel like you are not alone.”

### **2.3.5 Discrimination**

Refugee and asylum seeking parents described experiences of discrimination in relation to employment. Some had experience of being discriminated against because of their name or their accent. One participant said that interviewers could pass over people because they couldn’t pronounce their names to call them. There was a discussion amongst participants where some, who already had refugee status, were advising other participants that once they had the right to work, they should change their email address if it had their name in, and possibly use an English-sounding name, to enable them to get interviews. Participants felt that it was dangerous forcing people to change their names to suit the norm and showed a lack of respect for people’s cultures, but some felt this was the only way to get interviews.

### **2.3.6 Asylum seekers and education and employment**

Some asylum seeking parents described wanting to work while holding asylum status in order to provide for their children, but not being able to due to restrictions. Even where

asylum seekers had received a work permit, accessing work could prove difficult. One asylum seeker described getting a work permit after waiting a year in the asylum process. While this gave them the right to work, the actual process of an employer being able to confirm this was unclear and it took two to three months to clarify what to do. In that time the employer gave the job to someone else.

Participants also described the restrictions on education that they faced, only being allowed to do part-time courses and only certain courses because of their immigration status. One participant described their only options as doing an ESOL course, despite speaking English as a first language, and having to do SCQF level 4 courses despite having much higher existing qualifications. As they could only study part-time, some described having to leave part way through a class while the other students stayed. These restrictions around education were demoralising and people felt they were not being treated with dignity.

### **2.3.7 What more did parents think was needed in relation to employment?**

Across the workshops parents highlighted the need for more flexible work that enabled them to balance parenting and employment. They identified a need for more understanding from employers about caring responsibilities, particularly for single parents and parents of disabled children.

The need for flexible, affordable childcare, and childcare that met the needs of disabled children, also came up repeatedly. One single parent summarised it as:

***“Job that works around kids, with good wage to support us access childcare during holidays etc.”***

There were also some more specific suggestions from participants about what was needed. One participant said that Scottish Government should help fund the expansion of provision of free holiday activities and food programmes to improve access to affordable, high quality childcare for all children who require it. Extending childcare provision to include children from birth was also suggested.

A suggestion from single parents was around providing support to enable families to enter higher education. A further suggestion from a group of asylum seekers was that there should be more apprenticeship opportunities, as this would allow parents to gain necessary work experience to obtain employment.

## 2.4 What did parents and carers tell us about their experiences and views in relation to the costs of living?

In general, it was very clear from the workshops that rising costs of living were putting additional pressure on family budgets. One parent said:

***“Even though it looks like you’re getting more, the money goes to pay bills...Additional support is needed to address financial strain effectively.”***

This was particularly the case for some groups of parents and carers. Parents receiving Child Disability Payment described how it mainly helped paying rising costs of food, electricity and heating. Families with a disabled child who did not receive Child Disability Payment, particularly parents from minority ethnic groups, described missing out on additional passported support, such as support towards fuel costs, or housing equipment, or making homes appropriate for their child’s condition.

### 2.4.1 School-related costs and support

There were generally high levels of awareness amongst participants in the workshops about Free School Meals and the School Clothing Grant. The survey carried out by one organisation found that these, along with the Scottish Child Payment, were the supports that were most favourably rated by the parents they surveyed.

The importance of children going to school and feeling that they had the same uniform and equipment as the other children was emphasised in some of the workshops. One participant said:

***“It’s simple things, but that builds on a child’s self-confidence or esteem. If they feel good in themselves, they will excel in their education.”***

Despite high levels of awareness generally, a number of participants in different workshops described not being aware for some time about this support and their children missing out. This seemed to be particularly the case amongst black and minority ethnic women, and refugees and asylum seekers. Some parents who were, or had been, asylum seekers described not knowing about the grant when they arrived in Scotland and not getting it initially when their child started school. In one of workshops held with black and minority



ethnic women, a number of the women had not heard about the school clothing grant prior to the workshop.

While free school meals were generally considered useful for parents on low incomes, a number of issues were raised about their suitability and whether children who were entitled to them got equal access. It was noted that some children didn't get to make use of free school meals because of dietary requirements. In one workshop with refugees and asylum seekers it was suggested that school food is not culturally appropriate and therefore is wasted when children don't eat what is provided due to their diet. One participant also raised concerns that the money that is received in place of school meals in the summer holidays did not factor in the cost of dinner and was not adequate. It was also suggested that teenagers do not like free school meals, and that it would be better to provide them with money as they do not eat in school.

Some participants whose children were neurodiverse said that children were missing out on free school meals because of the noise level in the school dining hall and lack of provision of a quiet place for lunch. This meant the parent had to provide a packed lunch instead.

The issue of school trips came up in some of the workshops, particularly in a workshop with refugees and asylum seekers. Parents were unable to afford school trips that other children were going on and this could be very upsetting for children. Some participants said their children didn't even tell them about school trips because they knew the family couldn't afford it. They noted that some schools might have funding available to enable children to go, but parents didn't know about it.

#### **2.4.2 Energy costs**

High energy costs came up in most of the workshops. It was said that even the energy cap in place is too expensive for low-income families. Some parents described having to make choices between food and heating. For parents with disabled children, costs of gas and electricity were a particular concern because they often had higher usage, particularly if children were only able to go to school for short periods. A parent – who had experienced their electricity supplier sending debt collectors to their home, causing trauma and anxiety to them and their child – said:

***“Electricity and gas costs are major costs and when child needs extra heating on, or for their equipment to be on, the heating supplement doesn't even touch the sides either.”***

The cost of heating was also raised as a particular concern in discussions amongst black and minority ethnic women and refugees, and those with larger families. One participant said:

***“I have four kids, my meter is running all the time.”***

Another participant described difficulties trying to contact their energy provider:

***“It’s hard to contact the energy provider and hard to get info. I message and call them, and they are not getting back to me. I want to understand what they want from me. The bills are a lot harder now.”***

Some parents were concerned that the Fuel Insecurity Fund was coming to an end. In one of the workshops with black and minority ethnic parents it was noted that some families didn’t get access to fuel vouchers because of lack of information.

### **2.4.3 Housing**

Housing was a key theme in the workshops. There were common issues raised across the workshops, which included discussions about availability, cost and quality of housing, and rent arrears. There were discussions about increases in rent and being stuck in temporary accommodation. One participant said:

***“I can’t go back to work because of the cost of rent...I’m stuck in poverty...”***

The need for more affordable housing was discussed and one participant identified that there should be higher priority for those with a disability. Another thought there should be help for single parents who would like to buy but can’t afford to save the deposit. One participant said there should be less profiteering from renting out properties, with realistic rents that matched the social security support available. It was suggested there was a need for help for people in rent arrears.

Problems with the condition of housing were also raised. One participant in a workshop with black and minority ethnic parents described living in temporary accommodation with mould and damp which was having an impact on the health of his children. The family was still waiting for more suitable accommodation. In another workshop the issue of the cost of decorating a flat to make it liveable was highlighted.

The issue of overcrowding and the need for suitable social housing for larger families, which tend to be more prevalent in some minority ethnic communities, was discussed in one of the workshops with black and minority ethnic parents. Participants said that some overcrowded families had been on the waiting list for many years. The housing crisis was seen as meaning that local authorities were unable to comply with their obligations to adequately house large families. In another workshop with black and minority ethnic women, one participant talked about the difficulties of siblings of different sexes having to share bedrooms as they were becoming teenagers.

Participants in a workshop including refugees, asylum seekers and those with No Recourse to Public Funds discussed difficulties in accessing suitable housing, especially for those with immigration status restrictions. There were concerns about homelessness and the limited availability of support for families in securing stable accommodation. One participant said:

***“I’m lodging and have no space for my baby. I don’t even think I can get homeless accommodation, even though my baby was born here.”***

Housing was also a particular issue when asylum seekers received refugee status. Participants said they were expected to move on from existing accommodation but there was no housing available. One participant described how having a supportive housing officer had helped with this.

#### **2.4.4 Digital access**

Concerns were raised in many of the workshops about digital access. Some participants were concerned that with so much information online, some families on low incomes do not have internet access, or the skills to access and complete information. The rising cost of living meant that families on low incomes were trying to reduce outgoings, and this might mean cutting things like Wi-Fi.

There was awareness in some of the workshops that some people had received free internet and free devices, but not necessarily where this had come from. In one of the

workshops, some asylum seekers mentioned services and organisations that provided discounted Wi-Fi, but these services did not work in their areas. In another workshop, one participant described having been provided with MiFi internet access for eighteen months but said it had then stopped. It was also noted that some people needed training on computers and iPads in order to make effective use of the online information and support available.

#### **2.4.5 Transport**

The cost of transport was raised in some of the workshops. Some participants described bus travel as expensive. There were high levels of awareness of free bus travel for children and young people, which was welcomed by participants in the workshops. A number of participants suggested that it should be extended to mothers to enable them to take their children to activities. It was noted that the free bus travel for children and young people does not support all children and young people, because some disabled children are unable to travel on bus.

Asylum seeker participants raised the issue of bus and transport costs as particularly relevant to them. The amount of money they receive per week does not enable them to travel to participate in activities with their children during the week. Younger children who need to be accompanied may therefore get limited value out of their free bus pass. As a result of transport challenges, one participant said:

***“I am always home.”***

#### **2.4.6 What more did parents think was needed in relation to the costs of living?**

Parents made a range of suggestions about action that could be taken to support families with the costs of living. Parents placed a lot of importance on ensuring that children had what they needed for school in terms of uniform and equipment, to prevent stigma and bullying. It was suggested that there should be more than one school clothing grant per year, as families should not be penalised for having fast growing children. One parent said:

***“Allow some discretion when comes to help with clothing grants for example as I am just over the cut-off point per month to qualify. I struggle to get two uniforms and soon need to get a third for last child going to school.”***

Another said:

***“School uniform should be provided by the government for all children. Children have to go to school and so uniform should be provided at no cost to parent/carer. This would eliminate the stigma.”***

Making sure that parents were aware of support with uniforms was also seen as very important. In one workshop it was suggested that it should be mandatory for schools and nurseries to let parents know they could get a grant for school clothing. It was also suggested that this should be paid automatically rather than families having to apply.

Expanding access to free school meals was also recommended by some participants. One suggestion was that school meals should be free for all families on Universal Credit. It was also suggested that the Scottish Government should write off all existing school meal debt.

Participants said more help was needed with energy bills. It was suggested that energy companies should provide more support. Other suggestions included that the Scottish Government should give everyone receiving low-income benefits the Winter Heating Payment, and that there should be targeted subsidies for low-income households.

Refugee participants highlighted the burden of heating costs, particularly in Scotland’s cold climate. They suggested providing additional support, such as increasing heating assistance or offering targeted subsidies for low-income households. One participant said:

***“Instead of giving only a one-off payment, they should provide ongoing support for heating costs.”***

Support with access to the internet was also a priority, both in terms of support with costs and access to training. One participant said:

***“More families like mine, on a low income need help achieve digital access and access to digital devices, especially where children do not have access to a laptop or broadband.”***

Another participant suggested making mobile ‘hot spots’ available free of use and accessible to all.

Support with transport costs was a priority for asylum seeker participants who suggested that the Scottish Government should give support with bus fares and train tickets. Some recommended a bus card for child activities, to ensure parents are able to take their children to activities that give them the opportunity of being socialised.

It was also suggested that there should be food vouchers for asylum seekers, and, if that was not an option, money should be given to organisations who support them to buy food that is culturally appropriate.

## **2.5 What else did parents and carers tell us was important to them?**

In addition to views and experiences around the drivers of poverty, participants in the workshops raised a number of other issues that were important to them and their families.

### **2.5.1 Discrimination and the importance of being treated with dignity**

Some participants described experiences of feeling judged and being treated badly, or discriminated against, when interacting with services or employers. Single parents raised this particularly in relation to interactions with Job Centre Plus. Black and minority ethnic parents of disabled children appeared to find it particularly difficult to get support and described experiences of being ignored, kept waiting and not hearing back from universal services, local authority services, not being given social work support, and experiencing long waiting times for assessments. A participant in one workshop said that support services needed to be educated on understanding sensitive issues such as race and religion.

The experience of discrimination extended to policies as well as personal interactions. These included lower levels of benefits for young parents and the two-child limit. Discrimination at a policy level was particularly felt by those with different immigration statuses, such as asylum seekers and those with No Recourse to Public Funds. There was a strong sense that all children in Scotland should be treated as equal but were instead being discriminated against in terms of access to benefits and services because of their parents' immigration status.

Asylum seekers described their feeling of exclusion from Scottish society, and feeling that they could not participate because of their immigration status. Participants cited their exclusion as a significant barrier to caring for their children.

Many of these families were reliant on charities for support due to their immigration status. While this was valued, participants highlighted the need to uphold individuals' rights and ensure dignity in the provision of assistance by government, rather than reliance on charity. There were concerns that being treated with dignity could be dependent on whether you had someone to advocate for you.

### **2.5.2 Access to play and activities**

For parents across many of the workshops, access to play and activities for their children was particularly important. Single parents talked about the impact of poverty on play, in

terms of lack of garden space and poor local outdoor spaces and playgrounds. Being limited to indoor play was difficult. One parent said:

***“Play indoors is more expensive...heating, toys, telly...”***

Another said it was:

***“Hopeless playing indoors when you’re overcrowded...”***

Parents wanted to give their children as many opportunities as possible, but many were concerned that they could not afford to pay for activities for their children. There were examples of parents trying to prioritise paying for activities on limited incomes, although some children were accessing free afterschool clubs. In one workshop it was thought that there should be basic child rights for such activities.

Some suggestions from participants in the workshops included there should be help with extras, like play area concessions, so that children could live a normal life, and that all children should have free access to council leisure facilities such as swimming lessons, gym classes, sports clubs and other services to benefit health and wellbeing. The primary reason that asylum seeking parents highlighted the need for support with transport costs was so that they could take their children to activities, because even free activities were out of reach if they required transport.

### **2.5.3 Education**

Access to education was raised in a number of workshops and was a particular concern for parents of disabled children and those with additional needs. Single parents talked about challenges with school attendance and additional support needs, and suggested that as a result students were being failed and that this was not ‘getting it right for every child’ as is the intent. One family shared their experience with a P5 child who cannot read or write, and their worries this will impact on the child’s future.

One of the messages from the survey of parents carried out by one organisation, was that lockdowns during the pandemic have created a generation of children with an interrupted



education experience. It was felt that schools were experiencing unprecedented demand for additional support for a broader pool of pupils and were struggling to cope with this.

Many of the parents who had a disabled child or a child with additional needs, described their children rarely being in school or only being in school for limited hours.

#### **2.5.4 The value of support from organisations**

It was clear that participants really valued the support that they received from third sector and community organisations, including the ones running these workshops. These organisations were a significant source of information and support, and often enabled them to connect with other parents who could share information and provide understanding and support. Single parents in one of the workshops talked about the importance of groups that allowed them to come together with other families and make friends. Some participants felt that more funding should be given to support groups and charities, as these are the main sources of information for families.

Community-based support networks were seen as important in filling gaps in government assistance, particularly for asylum seekers and refugees, and those with No Recourse to Public Funds. However, participants with No Recourse to Public Funds reported being confused about what community-based supports they could access. Asylum seekers in particular mostly received support from third sector organisations, including support with housing, money and vouchers, and support with items for babies.

Some participants in the workshops felt that this reliance on third sector organisations and community support networks was undignified and unsustainable. While they highlighted the valuable role these organisation and networks played in disseminating information and helping those in need, they felt this should be government's role. One participant said:

***“People shouldn’t have to rely on third sector organisations for information. Government policies should provide dignified support to those in need.”***

### 3. Ideas for change from our workshops

This report has given an account of a number of workshops and a survey with parents and carers from priority families.

Some themes clearly emerge from this and the Commission would highlight three areas in particular for the Scottish Government to reflect on. These include:

- The need to continue to improve awareness of and access to benefits. There was no single way of providing information that worked for all families, instead parents were looking for information to be provided in a range of ways, including through universal services and support organisations. Black and minority ethnic families often faced additional barriers to accessing benefits, and this was compounded when families experienced multiple inequalities, for example where they also had a disabled child. Further work is needed to ensure that efforts to improve access meet the needs of these families.
- There are significant challenges for families in balancing paid work and family responsibilities. The need for flexibility from employers and suitable, flexible, affordable childcare were key messages from families. This is particularly the case for single parents and parents of disabled children. Employability support needs to take into account the needs and barriers experienced by families.
- While refugee, asylum seeking and No Recourse to Public Funds families may be smaller in numbers than other family types, they experience very significant inequalities that impact on their children. For these families, understanding what they are entitled to is particularly complex because of their immigration status and because those providing them with information may not understand the full implications of their immigration status. Parents cited incidences of discrimination when interacting with services and employers and felt they weren't always treated with dignity and respect. For those with No Recourse to Public Funds, their immigration status could make them particularly vulnerable to poor employment practices. Lack of money for transport contributed to asylum seeking families feeling isolated. While there are restrictions on what the Scottish Government can do, all avenues to provide support and address discrimination should be explored.

Participants were from diverse backgrounds and had a range perspectives on child poverty based on their experiences. As such they could not be expected to come to consensus on every issue raised but they made a range of suggestions and ideas for change that are worth policy-makers being aware of, and considering further. For this reasons, the Commission made the recommendation in our 2023-24 scrutiny of Child Poverty Delivery Plan progress that the Scottish Government should review these evidence and ideas from parents and carers, and consider what further action it can take in response. The

Commission has published this fuller report of these workshops in order to facilitate this consideration.

The Commission has summarised some of the main suggestions and ideas coming from these workshops below.

## **Ideas for change from our workshop participants**

### **On raising incomes from social security, participants suggested:**

- Improving the availability, accessibility and consistency of information available to parents. This includes:
  - Providing access to information through universal services, such as schools, nurseries, GPs, health visitors and libraries
  - Providing information at different stages of children's development
  - Providing information at points of change or transition, such as when a disabled child receives a diagnosis, when parents' immigration status changed etc
  - Making particular efforts to engage with those who face language barriers, including making information available in translation and in person
- Funding support groups and charities to promote benefit entitlement, as these were the main source of information for many families.
- Specific support for people with different immigration statuses, to make sure their children got the benefits they were entitled to. Suggestions included:
  - a comprehensive website with information and resources for people with different immigration statuses about what was available and eligibility
  - providing multilingual resources
  - collaborations with community networks, community organisations, local authorities and service providers
  - awareness raising campaigns using various platforms
- Automation of benefits so that families got them automatically if entitled.
- Having a minimum level of financial support that people should not be below.
- Suggestions on specific benefits, including:
  - Removing age restrictions from the young carers payment so carers under the age of 16 could benefit
  - Giving everyone receiving benefits the winter heating payment
- Scottish Government should lobby the UK Government to remove the two-child limit and benefit cap, and call for equal Universal Credit payments for those aged under 25.

### **On raising income from employment, participants suggested:**

- A need for more flexible work that enabled parents to balance parenting and employment.
- A need for more understanding from employers about caring responsibilities, particularly for single parents and parents of disabled children.
- Flexible, affordable childcare was needed, including childcare that met the needs of disabled children. Some parents suggested this was needed from birth.
- Free holiday activities and food programmes should be expanded.
- More support to enable parents to enter higher education.
- More apprenticeship opportunities to allow parents to gain work experience.

It should be noted that not all families are of the view that dual earning households are a desirable outcome for children.

### **On reducing household costs, participants suggested:**

- Action to support families with school uniform. Ideas included:
  - More than one school clothing grant per year to allow for children growing out of clothes
  - Discretion to help families just over the cut-off point to qualify for the school clothing grant, particularly those with multiple children at school
  - Providing school clothing at no cost for all children
  - Making it mandatory for school and nurseries to make parents aware they could get a school clothing grant
  - Automating the school clothing grant
- Expanding access to free school meals to all families, for example to all families on Universal Credit, and writing off all existing school meal debt.
- More help with energy bills. Ideas included:
  - More support from energy companies
  - Giving everyone receiving benefits the Winter Heating Payment
  - Targeted subsidies for low-income households
- Support with costs and training to access to the internet
- Additional support for asylum seekers with transport and food costs. Ideas included:
  - Support with bus fares and train tickets
  - A bus card to allow parents to take children to activities
  - Food vouchers, or, if that was not an option, giving money to organisations that could support asylum seekers to buy food that is culturally appropriate