

Action for Children manifesto for the 2021 Scotland Parliament Election

Roadmap to Resilience: Securing a thriving future for Scotland's children.





Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care, ensuring their voices are heard and campaign to bring lasting improvements to their lives. We have operated across the UK for more than 150 years and here in Scotland for 66 of those. With 87 services across Scotland, our 800 staff support more than 20,000 children, young people, and their families, across 30 of the country's 32 local authorities, we are one of Scotland's largest children's charities. We have a bold and ambitious vision that every child and young person in the country should have a safe and happy childhood and the foundations they need to thrive.

We believe all children and young people have unique potential and that they should have the support and opportunities they need to reach it. The Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government may not have all the levers of power; however, they will have numerous controls which they can use to ensure Scotland's young people have the foundations they need to thrive. We urge all political parties to outline clear and robust policies for achieving this goal.

The upcoming 2021 Scottish Parliament election will take place against the unique backdrop of the covid pandemic, which has brought with it global as well as national and local health and economic hardships, social and wellbeing restrictions, and uncertainty. For the children, young people, and families we support many were already struggling and only "just coping" before the pandemic struck. Life was uncertain. And life should not be like that, especially for children.

Although Scotland has ambitious child poverty targets, they are not on a trajectory to being met. Child poverty remains a stubborn stain on the fabric of Scottish life. Latest figures showed that between 2016-2019, 24% of Scotland's children lived in poverty that's 230,000¹. While government statistics have revealed that in 2018/19 there was an educational attainment gap of 8.4%². It means that children living in the most affluent areas of Scotland continued to perform at a higher level than those living in the most deprived communities. This is unacceptable.

Before covid, Scotland's homeless figures jumped by 4% as 31,333 households were assessed as homeless in 2019/20, this included 15,711 children³. While at the end of December 2019 over 10, 000⁴ young people were waiting to start treatment at Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

Given that almost a decade has passed since the Christie Commission stated that 'a shift in spending priorities to the prevention of social problems' was needed. There have been real issues in putting this into practice and in many cases, this has proved challenging⁵. Scotland missed an opportunity to make this shift. It has meant that children, families, and communities have not had the resilience which they need to weather everyday life, let alone an international pandemic.

Action for Children know that many children's life chances and services were under pressure before covid. The pandemic has occurred at a time when they and their families had little resilience to manage its impact. This has meant the harsh realities facing Scotland's vulnerable families have been exacerbated by the pandemic. Covid has created a double blow by magnifying inequities in vulnerable families while also increasing the number of children who are deemed as vulnerable. As a result, children and their families are now facing unprecedented challenges.

While it is understandable the world longs to get back to normal, we must not go back to the old normal. It should not have been deemed the norm to experience high child poverty levels, large education attainment gaps, lack of provision for mental health and wellbeing, inadequate housing and accommodation and an increase in jobs which were insecure or low paid. That normal was letting down too many children, young people, and their families.

Instead, we should aim to create a new normal. One where we don't have child poverty and that young people can reach their potential no matter their background.

Before covid, Action for Children believed that two recent pieces of work were a good starting point to begin a journey of creating transformational change for the children of Scotland.

The Independent Care Review (ICR)⁶ reported via a series of reports that care in Scotland is *“fractured, bureaucratic and unfeeling”* and does not *“does not enable children to feel loved, safe and respected”*.

The main theme of early intervention and prevention was a constant through the ICR reports, as was the need to invest in services to help support families to stay together.

In its ‘promise’ report the ICR set out what needs to change in the care system to ensure children and young people grow up loved, safe and respected. Political Parties in the Scottish Parliament agreed to sign up to keep ‘The Promise’. We want to ensure that parties keep their solemn promise and that they will offer policies and spending priorities to ensure the ICR recommendations are implemented.

Incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots Law, was the other significant piece of work. The UNCRC sets out the rights that every child should have, and these rights should be met by our government. Incorporation helps to ensure that children and families are at the centre of decisions. The UNCRC stresses the importance of family, recognising that children “should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding⁷”. By incorporating the UNCRC it will give children and their families legal recourse if their rights are not being met, it will be incumbent for the whole of Scotland, not just for national and local government to invest in protecting and delivering children’s rights.

Before covid, these two pieces of work laid the foundations to make real positive changes for Scotland’s children. Covid has now accelerated the need to make fundamental changes. This paper sets out Action for Children’s roadmap to resilience, we have produced milestones that should be met to ensure that Scotland can support children, young people, and their families to recover from the negative impacts of covid while building their resilience for the future. Our paper draws on our experience of supporting children, young people, and their families pre and during covid. It is informed by the expertise and experiences of our frontline staff and the families and young people who they support, care for and love.

The Scottish election in May 2021 is an opportunity for every political party to commit to building resilience for Scotland’s children and families. We hope this paper will be of benefit to the political parties contesting the election.

In times of crisis, or in times of calmness, families need supportive governments in order to raise the next generation of happy and healthy citizens. As such Action for Children will hold our elected representatives to account. We need a coherent approach, across all government portfolios that considers the needs of children, young people, and their families.

Our roadmap to resilience is not about delivering us back to normal. It’s about taking Scotland on a journey to create and invest in a new normal that ensures every child and young person in the country has a safe and happy childhood and the foundations they need to thrive.



Action for Children asking to build resilience by:

Tackling poverty, inequality, unemployment and enhancing young people's voice

- Commitment to increase the Scottish Child Payment to £20 per week in the Government's first budget.
- **Publish a children's budget addressing the poverty and inequality facing Scotland's children.**
- Close the digital divide ensuring all low-income students get an electronic device and internet provision.
- **Invest more in support to the Scottish Welfare Fund, setting standardised minimum award for Crisis Grants.**
- Remove the costly ID barrier. Offer a passport, or birth certificate when people reach their 16/17th birthday.
- **Create an education catch-up fund, for missed and disrupted learning. Equalizing education opportunities.**
- Develop a School Leavers' Toolkit to equip school leavers with vital life skills.
- **Fund a holistic wrap around in-employment youth support.**
- Include those with lived experience in participatory budgets and Local Child Poverty Plans.
- **Boost co-production by including children in their service design and spending decisions**
- Double the current 1% target of council budgets to be allocated to community participation.
- **Fund a national UNCRC information and awareness drive.**
- Targeted employability support for young people that were already marginalised before covid struck.

Investing in family support services and ending youth homelessness

- **A new contract with the families of Scotland. Giving the right to family support services, free at the point of need.**
- Services must be tailored to individual family and community's needs, aspirations, strengths and skills.
- **Mandate local authorities to carry out family support mapping exercises to assess local needs and provision.**
- Tendering of services to be realigned so that we have one of cooperation, partnership, and collaboration.
- **Fund preventive services and place a renewed focus on young people who are on the edge of homelessness.**
- Invest in young people who can't stay in the family home.
- **Transform wrap-round and outreach housing support for young people at pre, during and post-tenancy stages.**
- Examine new approaches to tackling youth homelessness and roll out successful best practice.
- **Introduce a four-month 'moving on transition' period for continuing accommodation.**
- End discrimination that young people encounter with private landlords.
- **Undertake a review of the assessments and financial support on offer to 16–17-year-olds.**

Supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing and empowering disabled young people

- To consider reconvening the Children and Young people Mental Health Task Force or enhance and financially boost its Programme Board. To enable a standalone workstream which forensically reviews, examines, and critically assesses the service provision and needs of young people's mental health during the pandemic.
- **Invest in children's social and emotional learning from primary school onwards to promote wellbeing and resilience.**
- Reduce the need of referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).
- **Ensure that mental health and wellbeing training is offered to all staff involved in educating Scotland students.**
- Extend offer of mental health provision to those people who have a substance misuse and or addiction issues.
- **Fund more community based mental health services to foster peer discussions to dispel stigma.**
- Ensure short break provisions are resourced. Supply will not keep up with demand unless further funding is given.
- **Tackle the issue of disabled children transitions into adult support. End delays in early transition planning.**
- Ensure all local authorities have specialist disability teams.
- **Invest in the provision of 'satellite and training' flats. As an innovative way to retain that familiar support network.**
- Ensure the voices of young people who have additional support needs are considered when providing care provision.
- **Empower young disabled people and their families by renewing a commitment to Continuing Care.**

Creating a smarter justice system for young people

- Increase the age of criminal responsibility: Children should not be tried in adult courts.
- **Put a stop to the fact that criminal records can follow offending children for decades.**
- Invest in preventive and intervention services that address the under-laying symptoms of offending behaviours.
- **Establish and fund a national network of appropriate secure and supervised care provision.**
- Ensure everyone involved in The Children's Hearing System are properly trained in the impact of trauma.
- **Invest in the help and support we offer young people coming out of institutions.**
- Review Scotland's working practices in the referral system and the allocation of supported accommodation.



Building resilience from poverty, inequality, and unemployment

Poverty is not inevitable. It is about the political and economic choices as well as the policies that governments, parliaments and politicians make.

Unfortunately, Action for Children witness the effects of child poverty every day and the impact it has on many of the children and families whom we support, care for and work with. We recognise that the impact of child poverty is not only felt and measured in purely financial means but is also by children having an increase in poverty of opportunity. Despite the fact Scotland has ambitious child poverty targets, and that action has been taken to tackle child poverty, latest figures show that between 2016-2019, 24% of Scotland's children still lived-in poverty. That's 230,000⁸ children.

We must remember that behind each statistic is a real child, with hopes and aspirations. The impacts of poverty are profound for Scotland's children: from poor mental and physical health and wellbeing to poor performance at school. The cruel irony is that poverty is expensive, it carries a so-called poverty premium. Research carried out in 2016 estimated that the average cost of the poverty premium is £490 per household per year.⁹ This 'premium' experienced by families and young people is made up of costly tariffs, pre-payment meters, high credit rates and the inability to bulk buy food. Or not being in a position to pay for a one-off quality item, instead paying multiple times for poorer quality items which do not last as long.

Adding to the poverty trap that families find themselves in, is the fallacy of the old adage that 'work, is a way out of poverty'. The harsh reality today is that 65% (150,000) of Scottish children are living in a working household¹⁰. Before the covid crisis, progress to meeting Scotland's child poverty targets was slow and, as a result, the targets were highly unlikely to be met. This already meant a renewed sense of urgency was needed if Scotland were to meet these targets. However, covid has disproportionately affected particular groups more than others and highlighted existing structural inequalities in Scotland's society and economy.

A digital divide was laid bare for all to see. Before covid, 800,000¹¹ people in Scotland were estimated to face digital inequality – with over a third of households in the lower income brackets not having any internet access. This inequality was exposed as Scotland's schools went into lockdown. Our staff reported some schools were very proactive in their communication with pupils and parents, and with the provision of resources, others had significantly less contact once the school buildings were shut. Action for Children provided families with digital devices as many were worried about their children falling behind their studies, their children did not have access to the same learning opportunities as children from well-off families.

While the full impact of school closures is not yet known, pupils' academic attainment is likely to reflect this inequality, both now and in the future. However, we already knew that in 2018/19 there was an educational attainment gap of 8.4%¹². It meant that children living in the most affluent areas of Scotland continued to perform at a higher level than those living in the most deprived communities. The digital divide caused more than just educational issues. It also impacts families' ability to claim and access Universal Credit and other entitlements, seek online advice and support, and stay in touch with others. Action for Children is concerned about the risk of widening inequalities with some families being digitally connected and others not.

Emergency Funding

As well as continuing to deliver our services to families during covid, Action for Children met family's urgent financial needs through our own organisational Emergency Appeal. This is a fund was designed to provide an immediate, one-off support to families faced with an unexpected expense or crisis, or additional pressures such as domestic violence, disability, or poor health. 71% of families who accessed our funds did not have financial issues before the pandemic, while 86%¹³ of our staff felt that the crisis had left the family finances of the children they work with worse off.

Action for Children also accessed the Scottish Government's Wellbeing Fund to meet the immediate needs of families and young people, such as providing food and alleviating financial hardship. We were also able to equip vulnerable families and young people with digital connectivity.

The need for this emergency funding highlighted that families did not have the resilience or resources to deal with the effects of the pandemic. Whereas before many families were "just coping" now they are on the cusp of crisis. Covid has led to significant escalation of need and exposed the poverty and inequalities that exist in Scotland.

To date we have helped 100s of the most vulnerable families across Scotland via our own Emergency Fund, worth a total value of £120,000 and £920,000 via the Scottish Government from their Wellbeing Fund and Winter Emergency Fund.

Social security

Under the Scotland Act 2016, several social security powers have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament. These powers are to be delivered directly by Scotland's Social Security Agency. There is an opportunity to use these powers to meet Scotland's child poverty targets and to cut inequalities.

Scottish Child Payment

As such, the Scottish Government created a Scottish Child Payment (SCP) to tackle child poverty. This a welcome use of social security powers and it could lift up to 30,000¹⁴ children out of poverty. That said, we know it will not go far enough to meet Scotland's child poverty targets¹⁵. The first families eligible for SCP received the first payment in February 2021, as opposed to the original date of December 2020. This delay has saved the Scottish Government £10m. While other eligible families will have to wait until the end of 2022¹⁶ to receive their initial payment.

The role of the Scottish Welfare Fund

This Fund was often the last port of call for families faced with income shocks, however during the pandemic it was often neither adequate nor accessible. The Poverty and Inequality Commission stated that local authorities could have spent £5.8m more via this fund to help people over lockdown¹⁷.

Social security should have a dual role of acting as a safety net and as a springboard. It is meant to be able to build resilience and protection for people. Unfortunately, too many families were falling through the cracks of the system before the covid crisis hit which in turn meant they were unable to weather the crisis. We also recognise that not all levers of social security powers reside in Scotland, and that many families were struggling to access enough social security support to meet their daily living costs. This was due many policy choices such as the overall inadequacy of benefit levels; having a cap, or sanction being placed on benefits. And structural choices like the length of wait families have to endure for an advance on (or their first) Universal Credit payment; or being unable to access advice to understand their entitlements to make a claim. Where the Scottish Parliament has the power it should be bold, and where it does not, it should be a strong and progressive advocate for change. As such we encourage all political parties to also push the UK Government to make changes to the system that they hold control over.

As members of the **End Child Poverty** (ECP) coalition we urge all political parties to support the ECP manifesto calls for action.



Poverty: Child poverty in Scotland remains a stubborn stain on the fabric of Scottish life. Political parties must deliver policies that increase and maximise incomes of families, through employment and social security while reducing family's costs. We call on political parties to:

Make a commitment to increase the Scottish Child Payment to £20 per week in the Government's first budget. Then subsequently ensure the payment increases by either CPI or median income growth, whichever is the higher.

Publish a children's budget that includes adequate resources to address the poverty and inequality facing Scotland's children and provides transparency on expenditure.

Maximise family's incomes. Run an information drive detailing what entitlements families can access. This should include investment in 'one-stop-shops' to ensure people are fully aware of their entitlements and rights when it comes to financial help, support, and advice and to sign post to other services. A joined-up approach that involves the Scottish, UK and local government is paramount. The third sector should play an active delivery role in these one-stop-shops.

Create an education catch-up fund, for missed and disrupted learning. Equalizing education opportunities. This education equalising fund would pay for, including but not limited to, catch-up tutoring, learning equipment and strategy toolkits, after school and holiday clubs and positive well-being workshops to help learning mindsets.

Close the digital divide. The Government must create a national programme to ensure all low-income students get an electronic device for learning alongside connectivity and that low-income households get free or greatly reduced internet provision. This should be a joint effort with the Government, private and third sectors and others working together to identify and roll out devices and supply connectivity.

Remove the costly ID barrier. One of the biggest issues that many young people report when accessing services, benefits, training, or employment opportunities is the need to have documentation to prove their identity. This can be costly and difficult to source. Government should find ways to bypass this barrier, by offering a passport, or a provisional driving licence or a birth certificate to all young people when they reach their 16/17th birthday.

Invest more in support to the Scottish Welfare Fund, this would include setting a standardised minimum award for Crisis Grants and improve the monitoring and evaluation of the fund.

Youth Unemployment

Another area of inequality which covid has exacerbated has been youth unemployment. Reports predicted that the end of 2020, youth unemployment in Scotland could have reached a record high of more than 140,000¹⁸. This is of great concern as previous records showed it took around seven years for the youth employment rate to return to its pre-economic crash 2008 levels.¹⁹

Action for Children know that those most at risk of the "scarring effect" of youth unemployment are those who have been underrepresented in workforce and employment support prior to the covid crisis i.e., care leavers, BAME, young carers and disabled young people and young people who have experienced the criminal justice system.

Action for Children has a strong record in deliver training so that young people can find employment and develop their career. Unfortunately, we believe that levels of youth unemployment are on course to increase. Especially in areas of construction, hospitality and retail, the areas we actively help young people to get their first foot on the jobs ladder.

A recent survey Action for Children conducted stated that 91% of young people felt anxious about their future, while 100% said they were bored and isolated. We cannot let this covid generation also become a lost generation, we can and must stop this from happening.



Unemployment: Young people are more likely to be low wage earners, possibly with zero-hour contracts and working in the very sectors that have been most impacted on by the lockdown. Action must take place to assist young people and families gain and keep employment. We call on political parties to:

Offer targeted employability support to those young people that were already marginalised from the labour market before covid struck, but now find themselves more removed as a result of the crisis. This includes care experienced, those with experience of the justice system and those young people who have few academic qualifications.

Fund a holistic wrap around in-employment youth support. While getting a job is a start it is not an end in itself. Many young people benefit from ongoing long-term support in other areas of their lives to support them to sustain that job.

Enhance the business pledge and ensure synergy with the Youth Guarantee. Scotland needs to create more decent jobs, which will pay the real living wage regardless of age. A new employer's initiative is needed to expand family-friendly policies, especially having access to quality childcare that is flexible and affordable.

Inequalities

Children who live in poverty and in inadequate and overcrowded housing, who had little access to safe green spaces, who had limited amenities. Those who didn't have quality transport links, who lacked a social support network have all been disproportionately affected by covid. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that low earners were seven times more likely than high earners to have worked in a sector that has shut down as a result of the lockdown.²⁰ While the National Records of Scotland state that people in the most deprived areas were 2.1 times more likely to die with covid than those living in the least deprived areas.²¹

Inequality of voice

Poverty is primarily the consequence of the way society is organised and how political choices are made and how resources are allocated. For change to happen, a shift in the allocation of resources needs to be given to those that need it most, so that we can build up their resilience. Those same people need to be part of the decision-making process. As Article 12 of the UNCRC²² states, the opinions of children and young people should be considered when people make decisions about issues that involve them. Action for Children want to see young people and families who experience poverty and inequality to engage and participate nationally and within their communities. They must have their say on the decisions that affect their lives. We know positive steps have been taken in Scotland with regard to this issue, however progress has not been as consistent or as deep as we had hoped for.

The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017²³ compelled local authorities and health boards to report on what they have and will do to reduce child poverty in their local area. However, recent evaluations of these Local Child Poverty Reports have found that many of these reports have gaps in the information they provide or do not provide a coherent narrative around how the plans were developed and how they will be evaluated. Also six out of the 10 reports examined did not mention involving any people with direct lived experience.²⁴

Participatory budgets

The Scottish Government introduced a 1% target²⁵ of local authority budgets to be allocated through community participation by 2021. Action for Children would like to see children, young people, and their families be able to take a more active role in these vital discussions.

An evaluation of participatory budgeting activity in Scotland stated: “It is imperative to invest in accessible and deliberative processes, to challenge established perceptions and behaviours, and take the lived realities of people's lives as a starting point if participation in public service decision making are to be inclusive and transformative”²⁶. Action for Children believe that children and young people should be heard but just as important listened to in these discussions.

UNCRC

2019 marked the 30th Anniversary of the UNCRC.²⁷ The UK ratified the Convention in 1991, but for the courts in Scotland to be truly bound by it, the UNCRC must first be incorporated into Scots law. At present it is welcome that the Scottish Government has committed to pass UNCRC incorporation legislation before the end of the 2021 parliamentary term.²⁸ We believe incorporating the UNCRC in Scotland will encourage a culture change, so that children are increasingly recognised as rights holders who should be involved in decisions that affect them, rather than as passive recipients of care and protection. Incorporation would ensure that children and young people are able to complain if they feel their rights have been breached, including to the courts in the most serious of cases. Incorporating the UNCRC into Scots Law will prove that Scotland as a nation takes the issue of children's rights seriously and values these rights. We believe it will give children and young people the confidence and respect to know that their rights are protected not just by warm words by the cold might of the law. As such children growing up in Scotland will know that their rights will be upheld, respected, and exercised, compared to some children today who view their rights as remote, distant, and unfilled.



Voice: National and local Governments need to invest and investigate how they can better involve people with direct lived experience. These voices need to be heard to help shape services and spending decisions. Children should not passively wait for assistance; they need to be active partners. They have a right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. We call on political parties to:

Outline a national and local strategy to ensure; Local Child Poverty Plans include those with lived experience, and those with lived experience of poverty play an active role in participatory budgets.

Create a new agreement between the Scottish Government and Local Authorities to double the current 1% target of council budgets to be allocated to community participation. This new 2% target would be a floor and not a ceiling to spending. This could see more investment in better amenities in communities, see an increase in safe green spaces, and bring about better transport links as requested by families.

Boost Scotland's co-production approach by investing in a national youth engagement strategy to proactively include children in spending and service delivery decisions and designs. Organisations that have the experience and trust with working with young people must be active partners in this initiative. Children should not be passive bystanders with regards to developing child-centred policies.

Fund a national UNCRC information and awareness drive. Children and young people must be given accessible knowledge about their rights. This should include outlining the different stages to challenge any perceived view that their rights are not being met.

Family support

Latest Government figures show that as of July 2019, there were an estimated 14,015²⁹ looked after children in Scotland. It should be our collective ambition to live in a country where no child or young person is in care, as they would be living safely and happily with their birth parents and families. Of course, there are times when this may not be possible, however for us to build towards this ambition we must invest in early and sustained family intervention support. We must offer families of Scotland a contract to outline the Government's responsibility and trust to these families in respect of family support services. This support should and must be a right for families to access.

It has been almost a decade on from the Christie Commission³⁰ which stated that 'a shift in spending priorities to the prevention of social problems' was needed. However, a report by Audit Scotland concluded that putting this into practice has in many cases proved challenging³¹.

The Christie Commission's view on spending priorities was echoed by the Independent Care Review³² (ICR) who heard the experiences of over 5500 care experienced children, and young people to create a vision to improve the care system in Scotland. In 2020 the Care Review published seven reports including 'The Promise' which set out what needs to change in the care system to ensure children and young people grow up loved, safe and respected.

The constant theme throughout the reports was that of early intervention and prevention. Services to help support families to stay together was one of the main findings of the ICR. It stated, '*nurturing and supporting families to stay together will take far more than what Scotland currently provides*'. ... *There must be a significant upscale in universal family support services.*' *Scotland must fulfil its commitment to early intervention and prevention*'. We note that the Scottish Government announced a £4 million investment into the 'Promise Fund' to make progress on the area of family support.³³

Action for Children has a long and successful history of investing in Family Support services. Our approach is a holistic one, which covers a broad spectrum from youth offending to stopping children young people entering into care. We know that every family is different, as such there is a need to tailor approaches which reflects these differences. Developing and embracing a holistic approach will see relationships form that work for the individual needs of each family member and child, taking care to listen and value everyone's needs. To operate this approach the workforce will be essential. Action for Children is proud that we employed throughout the years more than 150 staff members who we previously supported and cared for or who have had care experience. Having that peer support can be crucial in building trust with families, especially when engaging with families who usually don't go to the places where traditional support is available. This echoes the recommendation made by the ICR that stated, 'the purpose of the workforce must be to be caring above anything else. That starts with recruiting people with the right ethos and qualities rather than qualifications.'³⁴

An independent evaluation³⁵ of Action for Children family support services found that: 'families reported significant changes to their child's behaviour, to routines and boundaries and experienced more positive family relationships which had improved family life, parental stress and anxiety'. It also went on to cite that 'Families were supported to build or re-build their relationships and parents often continued to spend time with individual siblings once services were no longer involved. There was less shouting and fighting with fewer arguments within the family'.

Family support is the living embodiment of preventative spend as it offers families support when an issue first emerges rather than waiting until the situation escalates. The right support can address a family's needs early on and it can reduce risk factors, which may cost more to put right if left unaddressed. Family support shouldn't be linear, it should be there at any time a family needs it, it is about building up family's resilience, it offers families tools and strategies to assist them create a safe and loving environment.

The covid crisis has also seen the need for family support soar, with many families reaching out for help for the first time. Many families encountered stress in relation to the fear of catching the virus itself and becoming unwell, and of the need to staying at home with many children being confined to limited space.

These situations unfortunately created conflicts and disputes. Many families who were not in contact or in need of statutory services before covid have now being dragged into the situation of needing support and those families who were already in receipt of that support now needed extra assistance.

As an organisation, we experienced a surge in demand of 415% for parenting advice in the first three months of lockdown compared with the same time last year. This demand led Action for Children to launch our online service, 'Parent Talk'³⁶. This connects parents and carers with trained parenting coaches. It's a confidential one-to-one online chat service gives parents somewhere to turn for free, practical advice and emotional support.

Before covid, family support may have held a form of negative stigma that parents and children were failing, but we know that everyone at some point in time could benefit with help and support. We know that every family is different, as such there is a need to tailor approaches which reflects these differences to offer families the tools and resilience needed to build and maintain strong family relations.



Family Support: Family support is all about building up family's resilience, it offers families tools and strategies to assist them to create a safe and loving family environment. Scotland needs to invest in these services as prevention and sustained family intervention support can increase the likelihood of keeping children out of care. We call on political parties to:

Enter into a new contract with the families of Scotland. The contract will give families the right to family support services, free at the point of need. It will give families the access to a suite of family support services provided by a suite of providers offering different types of support to different situations.

Ensure services are not a 'one-size-fits all' but in fact tailored to individual family and community's needs, aspirations, capacities, strengthens and skills. The family contract will help create resilient families, building trust, empathy and openness through mutual learning and support. Family support services must be funded to run beyond normal 9-5 office hours.

Mandate local authorities to carry out family support mapping exercises to assess local needs and provision. This will establish a local contract with families, which will redesign existing structures, services, and reallocation of funds both from a statutory and non-statutory service perspective.

Encourage and make it smoother for organisations to recruit people with the right ethos and qualities rather than just qualifications, having staff that can form trusting relationships with families will be key to success.

Realign tendering processes so that they are one of cooperation, partnership, and collaboration for the benefit for the children, young people and families we seek to serve.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

It was recognised that Scotland had problems with young people accessing support for their mental health and wellbeing, that is why in 2018 the Young Person Mental Health Taskforce³⁷ was established. Despite this at the end of December 2019 official reports showed that over 10,000 young people were waiting to start treatment at Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Compounding this statistic was the fact that only 64.5% of children were seen within 18 weeks, far short of the Government 90% target³⁸.

Sadly, mental ill-health amongst young people is a growing crisis. In the past 25 years, rates of depression and anxiety among teenagers have increased by 70%³⁹. The impact of mental health problems on young lives is significant. Children and young people with mental health issues are more likely to have negative life experiences early on, that can damage their chances as they enter adulthood. We know that 75% of adults with lifetime mental health problems first experience symptoms by the age of 18⁴⁰, yet there is still a huge stigma surrounding this issue and children and young people are not receiving the early support they need.

Action for Children has a strong record in supporting the mental health needs of children and young people. We have helped to identify children with early signs of difficulty, we have supported them and ensured they get the professional help they need to build resilience, confidence, and well-being. We recognise that pupil wellbeing is a clear educational priority, as effective social and emotional competencies are inextricably linked to better achievement and attainment.

For the past decade, we have run our Roots of Empathy (RoE) programme, which places a focus on primary school age children. A recent independent evaluation⁴¹ of this programme states, it is a cost-effective programme that has evidenced improvement in pupil's attainment with children being more aware of their own feelings and others. The report highlighted RoE is particularly effective in engaging and connecting with those children who are often referred to as 'hard to reach', resulting in major 'breakthroughs' with those pupils.

While our 'Blues Programme' is aimed at those young people aged 13-19, the programme supports young people who are suffering from, or who are at risk of developing depression and other mental health problems. By acting early to identify and reduce the signs of anxiety and depression, this pioneering preventative programme supports the long-term mental health and wellbeing of students. We offer cognitive behavioural strategies and provided students with a 'toolkit' for life.

Action for Children offer a full spectrum support from prevention and early help through to more intensive support and targeted 1:1 counselling for children and young people in greatest need. We have adopted a new model for an emotional wellbeing service which has started in the Inverclyde area and we also launch in Orkney too.

Action for Children believe that a focus on pupil wellbeing will be crucial to promote recovery and build resilience from lockdown. It can also mitigate the impacts of the ongoing covid pandemic. A survey⁴² conducted with 10,000 children found, one in three state they did not generally feel cheerful and in a good mood while half of those said that they were worried about how their family was coping. This study outlined a range of evidence that lockdown was linked to social isolation, anxiety and a drop in health and wellbeing amongst children and young people. Moreover, for pupils from low-income families and deprived communities, the impacts are likely to be even more profound.

The return of full-time schooling presents an opportunity to promote resilience and recovery by prioritising children and young people's emotional wellbeing as the best way of supporting pupils back to learning. Without targeted action, there is a real risk that the long-term impacts of Covid-19 will serve to further widen the poverty-related attainment gap.



Mental Health: The covid crisis has increased many peoples' experience with negative mental health and wellbeing issues. Building resilience in this area requires equipping young people with the tools and strategies needed to deal with these issues. We call on political parties to:

To consider reconvening the Children and Young people Mental Health Task Force or enhance and financially boost its Programme Board. To enable a standalone workstream which forensically reviews, examines, and critically assesses the service provision and needs of young people's mental health during the pandemic. Young people and practitioners must be at the heart of this review to make recommendations to future proof and build resilience to young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Invest in children's social and emotional learning from primary school onwards to promote wellbeing and resilience. This should be a whole-school and whole of Scotland investment and approach. We recommend Roots of Empathy as one proven, cost effective programme to replicate across Scotland.

Reduce the need of referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), by investing in secondary school counselling and adopting a blended model of early assistance, including a Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) approach. The Blues programme is a tried and tested model which Action for Children use to deliver that blended approach. This increases young people's resilience through a range of therapeutic support, including targeted 1:1 counselling and group work, as well as preventative activities

Ensure that mental health and wellbeing training is offered to all staff involved in educating Scotland students.

Fund more community based mental health services that promote collective peer voices discussing young people's mental health issues dispelling stigma and providing parents with the skills, techniques, knowledge, and tools to reduce and manage mental health symptoms.

Extend offer of mental health provision to those people who have a substance misuse and or addiction issues. All too often we hear stories of young people being turned away for mental health care because of their addiction is their coping mechanism, this seems counterintuitive we should be removing barriers for these young people who are seeking help and support for their mental health.

Disability

Action for Children provide short break services, care and support for children and young people who have learning or physical disabilities. We provide support for disabled children and young people, and their families, to help them reach their full potential. This includes promoting the integration of children and young people into the wider community.

Article 23 of the UNCRC states a disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community. Despite this right many disabled people in Scotland face differences in outcomes compared to non-disabled people. For example, according to the latest Scottish Government analysis⁴³ in Scotland households containing a disabled person have higher levels of child material deprivation (20%) compared to households with no disabled people (8%). Overall, only 53% of young people felt that their perspectives were considered by adults. While disabled children reported more social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties at an early age, compared to non-disabled children. The Scottish Health Survey estimated that 32% of adults and 10% of children were disabled⁴⁴. This is a significant size of the population and as such their needs should be addressed.

We know that caring for a disabled child or young person can be challenging. Even the most experienced parents and carers will sometimes need someone to turn to for advice and support.

However, covid has placed extra stress and pressure on families with disabled children. Many families were worried about protecting their child from the virus, this meant some families voluntarily took the decision to not to utilise short breaks, while other families found that provision withdrawn due to the covid situation.

These short breaks are vital, they provide families with a break from their caring responsibilities. It can enable families to get a break and spend time with other family members, time to have leisure and rest. This provision is often the key to helping families avoid breakdown, thus, also avoiding children being placed in full time residential care.

Short breaks are also beneficial to the disabled young person it provides them with opportunities to experience new social and leisure activity within the community, offers them time to spend with peers and to develop relationships with others.

Covid has meant that many disabled children have missed out on short breaks, we believe that a build-up of significant demand will be unleashed when the covid crisis eases. However, this increasing demand will not be met by the current supply Scotland has to offer. This will need to be addressed and funded appropriately to ensure that disabled children are not further disadvantaged due to covid.

Another issue that also needs addressing by any future Government is the process involved in disabled children transitioning into adult care. Ensuring that families and young people are aware of their rights and caring provision including the option of continuing care needs to be addressed when examining the transition into adulthood. While continuing care has been a great step forward in supporting young disabled people with the transition into adulthood it has been underutilised provision. Continuing care can offer time for adult services to really get to understand and know the needs of the individual so they can develop and offer suitable, sustainable, and empowering adult services. Continuing care should be front and centre in care discussions with families and local authorities. As it offers the opportunity for young disabled people to retain an appropriate support system until they enter into adulthood. Too often the continuing care option has not been transparently or appropriately explored, mainly due to financial concerns.

Responsibility or lack of it remains as a major issue, unfortunately in all too many cases Action for Children staff have witnessed that a young person's 'children's worker' has placed a hold on any early transition planning. When this working practice occurs, the explanation has always been that an 'adult worker' would take the transition process forward, however there is often a significant delay on the young person being allocated that 'adult worker'.

This delay has a negative effect on issues like guardianship, benefits, and entitlements, job and college placements and general transition planning. We are aware of just a handful of local authorities that have a transition team embedded into their social work department, some local authorities do not have any specialist disability teams anymore. This needs to change.



Disability: Every disabled child and young person should enjoy the same rights and opportunities as every other young person. Their aspirations should be supported. Families with disabled children must also be supported to develop positive and strong relationships with their child. We call on political parties to:

Ensure short break provisions are properly resourced. Covid left many families unable to use short breaks, to the real detriment of the young person and the wider family. Supply will not keep up with demand unless additional funding is injected into the system.

Tackle the issue of disabled children transitions into adult support. There must be an end to delays in early transition planning. Having an adult worker available to begin transition planning in concert with children's services can make all the difference to taking away the anxiety, worry and distress which these delays cause young people and their families.

Ensure all local authorities have specialist disability teams. Having the right skills, knowledge and understanding of young disabled people can make all the difference to what provision is made available to that young person. Specialist knowledge will halt the go-to- healthcare option as the destination for young disabled people transitioning into adulthood. Real need to invest, increase, and embed transition teams into local social work departments.

Empower young disabled people and their families by renewing a commitment to Continuing Care. Having support potentially available in some form until they are 26, removes the cliff edge for young people. If disabled young people want to exercise their right to continuing care, enhanced financial commitment must be forthcoming from national and local government. Alongside this commitment, better signposting of this option must take place.

Invest and promote in the provision of 'satellite and training' flats. These flats can be an innovative way to still provide to the young person that familiar support network. These flats need to be located where young people can get the most out of local amenities. Young people should be offered services and accommodation which can help develop and realise their potential and widen their social network. There needs to be more investment in building up and developing the skills young people require for living independently after care.

Commission a review into how Scotland's young disabled people's views are considered with relation to their care provision. Scotland needs to ensure the voices and views of children and young people who have additional support needs are considered when providing care provision and services. One issue that needs addressing is examining the ways and methods to gather views from non-verbal children and young people.

Homelessness

The most recent homelessness statistics are shocking they should shake us into action. They show that in Scotland 23% of homeless applications were from young people aged 16 to 24. Overall, 31,333 households were assessed as homeless in 2019/20, this was a 4% increase on 2018/19 levels. These households were made up of 15,711 children⁴⁵.

Article 27⁴⁶ of the UNCRC states it is the right of every child to have a standard of living adequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development... including housing.

Being homeless means not having a safe place to call home, for children and young people a home should be a place that provides safety, privacy, and allows them the opportunity to be part of a community offering a sense of belonging. Homelessness can place people on the margins of society where they encounter prejudice and can often be denied the opportunity to participate in the community in a purposeful way.

For too many children and young people in Scotland, they don't have a home, we know that young people have distinct experiences of, and ways into, homelessness. This can include mental health issues, family conflicts and breakdowns, overcrowding, violence and abuse, leaving care or being involved in organised crime.

Homelessness conversely is not just about the lack of houses or accommodation but about lack of resilience and strong relationships. Recent research⁴⁷ found that family relationship breakdowns still remain the largest single cause of youth homelessness in Scotland, accounting for over half the total number of homelessness applications annually.

Homelessness can leave a negative lasting impact on young people, ranging from their education and employment chances to their physical and mental health and wellbeing. All too often young people feel they have no choice but to leave the family home. Without appropriate support, many will continue to grapple with homelessness and its consequences right throughout their adult life.

Action for Children aim to reduce homelessness we do this by providing a range of services. We work with young people in the community this includes intervention work like providing housing advice and conflict resolution. We offer general counselling and support services including befriending, advice on food preparation and encouraging how to develop and maintain more stable and independent lifestyles. We strive to increase awareness of youth homelessness and the support available to young people, we also provide homelessness education in schools. Our homelessness support aims to be welcoming and accessible. We respect and value young people as individuals, while acting in a professional, non-judgemental, and confidential way. When young people do become homeless, we also offer supported accommodation.

Where there is the political will, we know changes can happen very quickly. The response to covid was a prime example of this. Across Europe countries commandeered hotels, holiday homes and Airbnb properties to get several tens of thousands of people off the streets. As a result, the number of people living on the streets in many EU countries dropped to near-zero⁴⁸.

In Scotland, the response was similar. The Scottish Government and local authorities, resourced action to protect the health and welfare of people in or at risk of a housing crisis. For example, all evictions were banned by the Scottish government until March 2021. While a new £10m Tenant Hardship Loan Fund, will offer interest-free loans to tenants unable to access other forms of support for their housing costs.⁴⁹

The Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2020⁵⁰ also came into force earlier than expected. Resulting in the fact local authorities have to ensure no homeless person spends more than seven days in unsuitable accommodation.

These responses highlight that where there is the political will to allocate adequate and necessary resources, outcomes for people can be improved. Now is the time for that political will to continue to offer resources and polices so that Scotland can banish homelessness and give young people the support and resilience they need to ensure they don't end up homeless.



Homelessness: That youth homelessness exists in Scotland, represents a denial of UNCRC and human rights. As a violation, youth homelessness must be ended. Youth homelessness prevention should tackle the underlying structural factors that put young people at risk of homelessness. We call on political parties to:

Properly fund preventive services and place a renewed focus on young people who are on the edge of homelessness. These services include engaging young people at school, offering family mediation, and delivering support and advice to families who face housing insecurity.

Invest in young people who can't stay in the family home. This must include funding programmes that equip young people with the skills and knowledge to maintain and sustain their housing tenancy. Young people in the process of entering adulthood, may not have the personal, social, and life skills that make independent living possible or appropriate. Therefore, investment should be given to services and support that develop these skills enabling young people to participate in education and have access to health and wellness.

A dedicated and fully trained 'Youth Housing team' should be incorporated into each local authority. This team would focus on 16–25-year-olds. The team would have the knowledge of what services these young people can access at this age as well as understanding the unique barriers and issues this age group encounter.

Transform wrap-round and outreach housing support for young people at pre, during and post-tenancy stages. This should include an information drive to highlight to young people where support networks are available, this will require a joined-up approach with national and local government and service providers. This support should include peer support.

Examine new approaches to tackling youth homelessness and roll out successful best practice. For example, the 'Housing First' approach which ensures that those that need it get a permanent home first and then build support experience to keep their tenancy. While the 'Shared living' scheme, which matches individuals to share a tenancy, also combats loneliness and social isolation.

Undertake a review of the assessments and financial support on offer to 16–17-year-olds regarding assistance for financial housing support and how this can impact other social security entitlements.

Introduce a 4 month 'moving on transition' period for continuing accommodation. Scotland needs to build up resilience in those young people who are fortunate enough to secure a job, apprenticeship, or education placement but in so doing would trigger an ending to their tenancy support. Starting a new job is highly stressful, we shouldn't add another layer of stress on top of this by requiring young people to move straight away from their tenancy. Young people should not be left with the false choice of deciding between, housing or employment. By providing this transition grace period it will allow young people the time to find appropriate and sustainable accommodation. It will enable young people to aspire to better life chances without the fear of having support immediately withdrawn.

End discrimination that young people encounter with private landlords. Unfortunately, we are aware that many 16–17-year-olds are refused tenancies solely based on their age and the perceived view that they aren't responsible or lack a history of renting, personal references should be considered to counter this view.

Youth Justice

In 2019/20, as part of the Children's Hearings System; 2,840⁵¹ children and young people were referred to the Reporter on offence grounds. While 326⁵² people under the age of 21 were in prison custody. Often those children and young people who most needed to be lifted out of trouble and adversity were the ones least likely to receive effective help and support.

We should strive to keep young people, especially those under 18 years, out of the adult court system and, where at all possible, avoid custodial sentences. Of course, Action for Children recognise that there are some young people who for their own and others' safety require secure accommodation for a period of time. This accommodation should be appropriate and localised, Scotland has seen almost half of its secure accommodation⁵³ places occupied by young people from England and Wales, this means less spaces are available for young people in Scotland, some of whom will

instead go into penal institutions. Unfortunately using adult criminal courts for 16 and 17-year olds and using inappropriate accommodation can lead to tragic and consequences like the suicide in Polmont YOI of William Lindsay⁵⁴.

Action for Children is concerned young people with the highest and most complex needs seem to be the most vulnerable to being involved in the adult criminal justice system.

Scotland needs to be smart on crime, and smarter in tackling the causes of crime. We need to invest in programmes that not only stop reoffending levels but also stop young people becoming involved, exploited, manipulated, or even coerced into offending behaviour.

Action for Children work with young people who have experience of the criminal justice system and support them on release from prison. We also offer community based diversionary activities and help to address offending or anti-social behaviour.

Our 'Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service' is an approach that identifies young people aged between 12 and 18 who are considered to be at risk of progressing to involvement in organised crime and using its products to work with them in pursuing an alternative career outside of crime. A recent review found 75%⁵⁵ of young people who have used the service were kept out of secure care including a number deemed "high risk" of entering secure care by the children's panel.

While our 'Moving On' service, which began in 2007 and operates in Renfrewshire, Glasgow, Inverclyde, East Ayrshire, and Highlands, provides a throughcare service for young males aged between 16-21 who are currently in or have recently been liberated from HMYOI Polmont. It showed that return to prison rates have remained consistently low at around 13% over two years since the service began, and this compares positively against the national average of 47% of young people returning to prison within a year.

Our staff who work in our youth justice projects have often lived experience of the criminal justice system themselves. They can relate to the young people we work with as they have the specialist knowledge and the empathy needed to connect and support the young people with regards to youth justice matters. And by using and turning around their negative experience they are making positive changes not only their life but changing others too. Action for Children is proud that we do employ people that have experience of the criminal justice, this is rehabilitation in practice.

There are smart and proven programmes which have produced results that can stop young people entering into offending behaviour and also can stop reoffending. Action for Children offer individual and structured care plans that incorporate a range of support methods. These include therapeutic intervention, individual and group work programs, life skills and support to access education and or training.

However young people have outlined their difficulties in finding employment due to the fact they revied a criminal record when they were young. Because of this we have developed strong relationships within some industries where the young people we are mentoring are given opportunities to gain skills and employment in sectors not required to have enhanced disclosure. This includes the catering and the building trade. We know that young people can turn their lives around so that they can contribute as productive and positive members of society and communities. But the issue of criminal records does create a barrier to young people moving on from their past.

Covid has also had an impact on youth justice in relation to appropriate accommodation for young people with experience of the criminal justice system and other vulnerable children. In the rush to house young people, usual risk assessments have failed to be undertaken, resulting in young people being placed in not fit for purpose accommodation. For example, young boys have been mixing in accommodation with older people, some who are hardened with criminal experience and drug misuse.

This practice is a consequence from an already fractured housing system that was failing many vulnerable young people. The increase length of stay and use of hostels, B&Bs and hotels as accommodation for vulnerable young people poses a current serious risk to child protection and their mental health and wellbeing. This type of accommodation routinely sees a lack of privacy with shared washing and toilet facilities with no real provision for storing food or cooking. Instead of having supported accommodation many vulnerable young people have been placed in an environment of having to confine themselves to their room, increasing their social isolation.

This self-isolation is undertaken not because of covid but because many young people feel the inappropriate accommodation and its surroundings mean they run the risk of being exploited, manipulated, or threatened. Unfortunately, this situation is now creating a new recruitment environment for drug use, gang membership and diminishing mental health and wellbeing. It is adding another level of vulnerability onto already vulnerable young people.

There is a strong link between offending and homelessness with about a third of offenders being without a home either before or after imprisonment⁵⁶.

Having accommodation on release can reduce re-offending by over 20 per cent. Given that accommodation plays a vital role more needs to be done to address the lack of appropriate accommodation on offer for vulnerable young people.



Youth Justice: Article 1 of the UNCRC states that a child means every human being below the age of 18 years. Scotland therefore must ensure that children be kept out of adult courts and invest in services which supports young people divert and move on from crime. Given the high social and economic cost to the public of a life of crime, programmes to reduce and halt re-offending should be seen as value for money. We call on political parties to:

Increase the age of criminal responsibility: under 18-year-olds are still children and should not be tried in adult courts. As signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Scotland is failing its responsibilities by putting children into the dock in adult courts.

Remove the criminal record millstone, we need to end the fact that criminal records can follow for decades those children who have experienced the criminal justice system. It places insurmountable obstacles in the journey to towards employment and a fulfilling life.

Invest in preventive and intervention services that can address the under-laying symptoms that may create offending and or harmful behaviours. Scotland must develop and implement smarter sentencing practices to deliver effective rehabilitation opportunities. Action for Children and other organisations have the supply of services that have been proven to help young people rehabilitate but we need the courts to assist with the demand.

Undertake a review of Scotland's working practices in the referral system and allocation of supported accommodation. Those involved in housing allocation decisions must undergo training to understand the often-complex needs and risk of vulnerable young people. A clear and transparent journey of decision making must be published so young people know their rights this must be a uniform approach adopted across Scotland. This journey must be joined up enabling sharing of information across all relevant parties, to ensure the best possible outcome for the young person. Independent housing advocacy must be provided and signposted to vulnerable young people. The use of hostels, B&Bs and Hotels must be a last resort not the first option, lengths of stay must be the bare minimum. Investment to increase supported accommodation provision must be ambitious. Best practice exemplars in the sector must be rolled out across the country.

Invest in the help and support we offer young people coming out of institutions. Levels of repeat offending are profoundly affected by the provision or lack of such support.

Ensure everyone involved in The Children's Hearing System are properly trained in the impact of trauma, childhood development, neurodiversity, and children's rights. This training must be comprehensive and regularly reviewed.

Establish and fund a national network of appropriate secure and supervised care provision. Intensive Supervised Care provision should be ramped up as a real alternative to custody by helping young people understand their behaviour and emotional wellbeing, they in turn then make safe and positive choices.

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