

A SCOTLAND FOR ALL OF US: POVERTY ALLIANCE 2021 SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTION MANIFESTO



INTRODUCTION

Over one million people in Scotland, including almost one in four children, were living in the grip of poverty even before the Covid-19 pandemic. Now, after a year in which people in communities across Scotland have struggled to stay afloat, a rising tide of poverty threatens to pull ever-greater numbers of people under. Women, disabled people, children and young people, and people from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds – all of whom were at greater risk of living in poverty pre-pandemic – have been particularly affected, and the inequalities that marked Scotland before the pandemic have deepened and widened.

But we cannot – and must not – accept this, and we can and must stem that tide. That’s why this Scottish Parliament election is so important to all of us. The post-pandemic recovery period offers not just an opportunity to rebuild our economy and society, but also an opportunity to redesign them to reflect our shared values of justice and compassion, and to loosen the grip of poverty on people’s lives.

The actions contained in this manifesto – which have been developed alongside Poverty Alliance member organisations, as well as community activists with experience of poverty from across Scotland – aim to boost incomes, reduce the cost of living, and ensure that people on low incomes across Scotland are able to more meaningfully shape the Scotland they want to live in. Many of these actions would also support Scotland’s transition to being a net zero economy, recognising that there can be no social justice without climate justice.

Every political party, and every individual MSP that is elected on 6th May, must realise the duty they have to take the bold, radical and ambitious action we need to end the injustice of poverty in Scotland. The next Scottish Parliament must be remembered as one that reshaped Scotland for the better, that prioritised the needs of those facing poverty and inequality, and that built a Scotland for all of us.

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SERVICES FOR ALL

“The free bus travel available to some – like disabled people and soon young people under the age of 22 – is really welcome. But we need to extend it so that the transport system works for everyone, especially young people who have been hit hard by the pandemic’s impact on jobs and who are under growing pressure. We also need to rethink other services, like childcare, so they actually support people on low incomes rather than making their hardship worse.”

Caroline, community activist

Whether transport, social housing, or childcare services, we all rely on collective services to help us live our lives. Yet for people living on low incomes, accessing the essential services they need can be challenging, if not impossible. For too many, the cost of these services – which are necessary to live a decent life – can tighten the grip of poverty.

What we define as essential services – and by extension, what we believe should be universal services – must change if we are to address the challenges of the post-pandemic world and if we are to ensure that our services work for everyone.

To address this, and to meet the essential needs of everyone, the next Scottish Government should commit to the principles of high quality Universal Basic Services; providing a social guarantee that nobody will go without the services they need to live decent, dignified lives. Doing so would support equality, help people access their rights, and enable access to essential and high quality services based on need, not on the ability to pay.

As first steps towards a Universal Basic Services approach, the next Scottish Government should:

Extend free bus travel to people on low income benefits and everyone under the age of 25

Our transport system is, for people living on low incomes, too often unaffordable and inaccessible. This can prevent people – particularly people in rural areas – from accessing employment, training and education opportunities, limit their access to essential services, and prevent them from maintain their social connections. Some recent positive steps have been taken, like extending free bus travel to all under-22s, but much more action is needed to create a transport system that works for everyone.

Widening concessionary bus travel to everyone in a household with a Universal Credit entitlement or on other low income benefits, and to everyone 25 and under – given the particular impact of the pandemic on young people – would be one first step in redesigning our transport system to play its fullest role in reducing poverty and tackling inequalities.

Expand funded childcare provision to 50 hours per week

A lack of affordable, accessible childcare is the most significant barrier preventing many women from being able to work or access training or education. As a result, many women are concentrated into low-paid and insecure jobs that, too often, lock them into poverty.

The Scottish Government's commitment to increasing the providing of free childcare to 1140 hours is welcome, but it is still not enough to enable many women to fully participate in the labour market. Particularly given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women's employment, there is a need to further increase the provision of free, fully flexible and culturally competent childcare in recognition of its critical role in supporting women's ability to participate in the labour market and in addressing poverty.

Commit to building at least 53,000 new affordable homes

Everyone should have access to a warm, secure, and affordable home, and making this a reality must lie at the heart of Scotland's anti-poverty efforts. Good progress has been made in recent years in the provision of affordable homes, but much more action is required to meet demand in the coming years.

A commitment to building at least 53,000 new affordable homes should therefore be the minimum expectation of the new Scottish Government.

Commit to ending digital exclusion, including by providing free, low-cost and high-quality broadband to low-income households

The pandemic has underlined the importance of digital access, and of ensuring that everyone – whether living in urban or rural Scotland – has the digital devices, connections and skills they need to access the services and information that they need to get by.

While there will always be a need to ensure non-digital means of accessing the services people need, it is clearer now than ever before that digital access should be considered essential to living a decent life. Ending digital exclusion is not only possible, but is critical in building a more just Scotland.

At least double investment in fuel poverty programmes such as Warm Homes Scotland

Programmes to tackle – and end – fuel poverty can help us in our twin goals of achieving social and climate justice, and in driving the shift toward a net zero economy. But to make this a reality, existing schemes designed to increase energy efficiency and heat decarbonisation in the domestic sector need to be significantly increased in both scale and pace. These schemes already make use of local suppliers, and could be expanded to create new, decent jobs that could form a key element in the goal of a just transition.

SOCIAL SECURITY FOR ALL

“In a just and compassionate society, we should all be able to live a dignified life. Everyone one of us is different, we all need different levels of support and have different needs. But there is one thing that everyone I meet who’s had similar experiences to me agrees on; we all have a right to an income that guarantees us enough to live on.”

Amanda, community activist

Following the passing of the Social Security (Scotland) Act of 2018, Scotland’s social security powers are significant. Welcome first steps have been made, like the introduction of the Scottish Child Payment, but much more ambitious action will be required in the years ahead.

If we are serious about ensuring that Scotland’s social security system plays its full role in loosening the grip of poverty on people’s lives, we must adopt the aim of a Minimum Income Guarantee for all. Such a guarantee would ensure that – through a combination of social security and work – everyone in Scotland meets a minimum income standard that enables them to live a decent and dignified life free from poverty. Such a Minimum Income Guarantee would recognise the additional costs of disability, as well as the gendered nature and impact of poverty.

As first steps towards a Minimum Income Guarantee, the next Scottish Government should:

At least double the value of the Scottish Child Payment and accelerate its rollout for children over the age of 6

The Scottish Child Payment is an important step in the development of Scotland’s social security system which will lift tens of thousands of children across the country out of poverty. However, based on its current value it will not go far enough for many families, with Joseph Rowntree modelling showing that, on current trends, Scotland’s 2023 child poverty reduction targets will be missed by four percentage points.

Given the way in which the pandemic has tightened the grip of poverty on the lives of families across Scotland – and with the interim child poverty reduction targets requiring to be met in 2023 – we need bolder action now to ensure that the Scottish Child Payment goes much further.

Action should also be taken to accelerated delivery of the SCP for children over 6, who are currently not due to receive the support until the end of 2022. For families who are struggling right now to stay afloat, that is simply too long to wait. The next Scottish Government should either fast-track the payment or use existing mechanisms to provide equivalent support to families in the interim. It should also keep the delivery mechanism under review to ensure the payment take-up is maximised and explore the potential to target the payments at primary carers.

Increase the value of other financial support for low-income families, like the Best Start Grant and School Clothing Grant

In addition to the Scottish Child Payment, other entitlements like the Best Start Grant and School Clothing Grant provide vital financial support to families living on low incomes. But there is a need to further bolster this support, by increasing their value and ensuring that they are uprated in line with inflation in order to continue to meet families' needs.

Increase the value of support provided to unpaid carers

The new Scottish Carers Assistance, which will be delivered by the Scottish Government in the coming years, provides the opportunity to ensure that unpaid carers – who are disproportionately women – are protected from poverty. It is vital that the next Scottish Government takes steps to better support carers and recognise the value of unpaid work, with current levels of entitlements increased significantly and with eligibility criteria reviewed to ensure that the needs of all unpaid carers are being met.

Maintain increased investment in Scottish Welfare Fund

For many people in Scotland, the Scottish Welfare Fund acts as a lifeline when facing income crisis. But for several years there has been growing evidence that the Fund is difficult to access, under promoted and often fails to provide an adequate level of support to people in need.

The Scottish Government's decision to significantly increase investment in the Fund at the outset of the pandemic was very welcome. But the issues that pre-dated the pandemic have not gone away. It is essential that the next Scottish Government maintains the increased investment in order to provide a more dignified, cash-based response to acute income crisis, and also that it undertakes a full review of the Fund – covering its accessibility, guidance, administration and adequacy.

Undertake an independent review of disability assistance that is co-produced with disabled people. This review should pay particular focus to six principles, which are that the Scottish social security system should:

- Have a clear purpose
- Be human rights based
- Support equal participation in society and independent living
- Be adequate
- Provide whole-of-life support
- Interact well with future social security development and is well-connected to other services

A LABOUR MARKET FOR ALL

“So many of us across Scotland feel locked into poverty by our job market. Too many of us, especially lone parents and young people, face too many barriers to work, and I worry this might get worse because of the pandemic. At the same time, lots of people in work are still struggling to get by because of low pay. We need to make sure everyone can access decent secure work to pay for their everyday living costs comfortably.”

Zahada, community activist

Covid-19 job disruption has had a disproportionate impact on low-paid women, BAME people, young people, and disabled people. But even before the pandemic, for too many people in Scotland, our labour market was serving to lock them into low-paid, insecure work, and was deepening the many inequalities that mark our society.

Women comprise the majority of low-paid workers and account for two-thirds of workers earning less than the real Living Wage in Scotland. With women's poverty inextricably linked to child poverty, tackling the gendered inequalities in our labour market is a critical aspect of our efforts to meet Scotland's child poverty reduction targets.

Whilst Covid-19 has highlighted the inequalities that exist in employment, we also know that the climate crisis has the potential to deepen these inequalities. As we transition to a net zero economy, we must also ensure that we take steps to ensure that fair work is at its heart.

To begin to build a labour market for all, the next Scottish Government should:

Attach Fair Work criteria to all public sector grants, contracts and funding as standard

In building a more just economy, we must set out a new relationship between the state and the private sector. There is a need to foster a sense of duty, responsibility and action on the part of the private sector to contribute to overall wellbeing.

There are exemplars in the private sector – companies that lead with their values and put these into practice through, for example, becoming Living Wage-accredited employers. When it comes to shaping the recovery it is these kinds of organisations, and those who aspire to be like them, that should receive the support of government and other public sector bodies. The requirement for all recipients of government grants, contracts and funding to provide Fair Work should be a first step in making this a reality.

Develop targeted employability schemes for groups most likely to be excluded from the labour market

Even before the pandemic, too many people in Scotland – particularly lone parents (who are overwhelmingly women), BAME people, disabled people, and people with mental health issues – found themselves locked out of the labour market. Some of these groups also found it particularly challenging to engage in the employability schemes that might help them overcome the employment barriers they faced.

In developing employability schemes, it is critical that those groups already facing exclusion from the labour market are not overlooked, and that targeted interventions – which, for example, provide flexibility to ensure all can engage in them – are aimed at them to ensure their exclusion is not further entrenched.

Ensure all employability and job creation schemes – such as the new Scottish Youth Guarantee – act in support of Fair Work

The Scottish Government has already announced a series of interventions aimed at supporting people back into the labour market, including the Scottish Youth Guarantee.

These are welcome, but their ambition must increase along with a stronger commitment to ensuring that they support the creation of decent jobs based on Fair Work principles, including the payment of at least the real Living Wage for all jobs support through the schemes. These schemes must also tackle the occupational segregation by gender and race that locked so many women and BAME people into poverty.

DEMOCRATIC COMMUNITIES FOR ALL

“Our people are our greatest strength but too often people, especially people in poverty, don’t feel able to influence the decisions made about their community. The pandemic has shown just how much compassion exists across our communities, but it’s time to match that compassion with the power to change things.”

Innocent, community activist

People on low incomes in Scotland are less likely to be involved in decision-making processes that most impact their lives, and often unable to exercise any influence over the distribution of resources or design of services in their community. This is wrong and must change.

Community-led processes and solutions need additional support from the Scottish Government – including via long term funding – and these processes and solutions must be at the heart of our economy recovery. The redistribution of resources and wealth within our society is critical in building the more just Scotland that we all want to see, but so too is the redistribution of power.

To continue the journey of building genuinely empowered communities, the next Scottish Government must:

Double the proportion of public spending spent using participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting is an important tool in ensuring that people have a meaningful say about the distribution of resources in their community, and can allow them a greater say over how poverty and inequality are tackled in their area.

Yet only a tiny proportion of public spending in Scotland is apportioned via participatory budgeting. While local authorities have committed to making 1% of their budgets subject to participatory budgeting by the end of 2021, this must double across the public sector over the course of the next parliament if we are to meaningfully empower communities.

Increase long-term investment in third sector organisations, particularly community-based organisations

Across Scotland, third sector and community-based organisations have been at the frontline of efforts to keep people afloat during the pandemic. The Scottish Government made significant funds available to support this work, but organisations across Scotland are now struggling to continue to deliver the services so many rely upon in the face of ongoing unprecedented pressures and demand.

It is essential that the next Scottish Government increases its financial support for this vital work, providing the longer-term certainty that organisations across Scotland require if they are to continue to provide lifeline services for people living in the grip of poverty.

Support the development of Community Wealth Building initiatives across Scotland

Community wealth building offers a practical approach to redesigning how our economy works; redirecting wealth and control of the economy away from extraction and toward local people and communities. In so doing, it offers an opportunity to closely connect economic development with social justice.

The next Scottish Government should further support the embedding of Community Wealth Building across Scotland; including by doubling investment to ensure that more local areas can begin to develop their approaches.

AN ECONOMY FOR ALL

“Our economy just isn’t working for so many of us. It’s locking people into poverty, and we need to rebuild it so that we all have enough. We have important tax powers in Scotland and we have to use them to create the economy we all want to see; one where poverty is solved and inequality is tackled, and one where wealth is no longer concentrated in the hands of a small number of people at the expense of those of us struggling to even stay afloat.”

Derek, community activist

No economy that locks over one million people into poverty – and in which the richest 1% own 10% of all the wealth – can be said to be a good or well-functioning one. As the last year has so clearly exposed, our economy is one that has created and entrenched deep inequalities across our society. Whether inequalities of gender, of race, or of geography, it is an economy that requires urgent redesign.

While the Scottish Government does not hold all of the economic levers, its economic powers – including its powers over tax – are significant. The next Scottish Government must commit to using these powers to their fullest and most ambitious extent; utilising them in order to create a wellbeing economy that reduces wealth inequality and that works for all of us.

To begin to build this more just economy, the next Scottish Government must:

Urgently reform council tax

For many years, council tax reform has been on the political agenda in Scotland without any significant action being taken.

Given its clearly regressive and disproportionate impact on low-income households, the next Scottish Government must finally take the steps necessary to reform or replace it with a fairer system of local taxation, with consideration being given to a form of land value tax.

Explore the use of local taxation powers to support Fair Work

As well as having new powers over income tax, the Scottish Government is also responsible for a range of local taxation. In rebuilding our economy after the pandemic, these local tax powers could be used not only to widen the tax base but also to drive the changes we want to see in order to create a more just Scottish economy.

Options exist, for example, to introduce a locally-collected low-pay levy in order to fund a Fair Work Bonus for Living Wage-accredited employers; incentivising employers to embed Fair Work practices rather than develop business models based on low-paid, insecure work.

Strengthen a progressive approach to income tax

Some decisions taken around income tax levels in Scotland in recent years – such as the decision not to pass on tax cuts given to some higher earners elsewhere in the UK – have shown a welcome approach to creating a more progressive taxation system. But there is still much more that could be done to ensure that those with the most contribute the most to our economic recovery and social renewal.

The next Scottish Government should take steps to create an even more just taxation system, by adopting an even more progressive approach to income tax levels and thresholds in order to generate additional resources to invest in tackling poverty.

Explore the use of wealth taxes

Scotland's wealth is held grossly unequally across our society; this is a deep injustice that must be addressed. The next Scottish

Government should establish a commission to investigate the potential use of existing powers to tax wealth, as well as to develop options in the event of future devolution of additional taxation powers.

Develop debt-write off schemes

Many people living on low incomes across Scotland are struggling with the constant pressure of carrying unsustainable debt – like council tax, utility and rent debt – accrued both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. For many, this debt acts as a weight pulling them deeper into financial insecurity and hardship.

The next Scottish Government should – recognising the way in which this debt can lock people into poverty, as well as ongoing stress and anxiety – work with local authorities, lenders and landlords to develop write-off schemes that will ease this pressure and allow people to move on with greater financial security.

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