

Aberlour Response to the Scottish Government Ending the need for foodbanks: consultation on a draft national plan

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About Aberlour

Aberlour is Scotland's largest, solely Scottish children's charity. We work with vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalised children, young people and families throughout Scotland, providing services and support in communities around the country. We help to overcome significant challenges, the impact of drugs and alcohol on family life, growing up in and leaving care, poor mental health, living with a disability, or the impact of poverty and disadvantage. We aim to provide help and support at the earliest opportunity to prevent problems becoming intractable or spiralling out of control. We are committed to **#KeepThePromise** and to the incorporation of the UNCRC.

Our Vision is ***'to give every child the chance to flourish and, through this, contribute to building a fairer and more equal society'***. Our Mission is to deliver that vision by supporting children and families affected by poverty, discrimination, adversity, addiction, disability and trauma within residential and community settings. We understand that not all children are born with an equal chance and are committed to beating poverty and discrimination.

Introduction

We welcome and share the Scottish Government's ambition to end poverty and the need for foodbanks. At Aberlour we see that food insecurity is one of the most common symptoms of child poverty and we support families across Scotland every day who struggle to provide food for their children.

Even before covid-19 more than 1 in 4 children in Scotland were living in poverty¹. The pandemic has created the perfect storm for families living on low incomes, pulling them into hardship and plunging many into even deeper poverty. Increasingly, evidence suggests that the number of children living in poverty will rise further, with even more strain on families who were already struggling to stay afloat.

From our work we see increasing numbers of children and families suffering extreme hardship, often lacking basic necessities and having to rely on foodbanks and charities, like Aberlour, for help and support. For so many of the children and families we work with the challenges they face are the result of, or exacerbated by, poverty. We see day-to-day that the pandemic has made things even worse for many more families.

Families have told us they find using foodbanks "demoralising" and stigmatising. Many appreciate the help and support they receive from foodbanks, but find they are limited in choice and rarely

¹ <https://data.gov.scot/poverty/cpupdate.html>

provide fresh food. Families we work with are clear that having money in their pockets, and the choice that allows, is better for them and their children.

We support the Scottish Government's efforts to end the need for foodbanks through rights-based, preventative and responsive approaches that better meet families' needs and which promote dignity and choice for families.

Aberlour Urgent Assistance Fund

Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund provides financial support via small grants to families and young people aged 21 and under living anywhere in Scotland and experiencing extreme financial hardship². Since the start of the pandemic applications to the fund from families needing emergency financial support increased by more than 1000%.

The cash grants help and assist with a range of basic needs, such as food, prepay power cards, clothing, bedding or other essentials. Over the course of the pandemic we have distributed more than £1.5m supporting nearly 5000 families with emergency financial assistance. This equates to more than 10000 children. The fund has supported families from all over Scotland across 31 local authorities.

Single parents account for more than 70% of those families who receive support. In addition, families living with a disability or illness, families affected by domestic abuse, families affected by parental mental health issues, as well as asylum seeking families and families with No Recourse to Public Funds, are those most commonly receiving assistance. A growing number of families are seeking help for the first time due to financial hardship directly as a result of the impact of the pandemic on their individual or family circumstances.

Through our Urgent Assistance Fund we see around 60% of families requesting financial assistance for help providing food. Without additional financial support many parents tell us they feel they cannot keep their heads above water. Parents tell us they feel ashamed that they are not able to provide for their children and have to rely on charities and foodbanks.

Research commissioned by Aberlour on the use of the fund during the pandemic highlighted that for many families accessing the fund their circumstances are: "***indicative of levels of poverty we would consider more absolute than relative***"³.

1. Do you think that the approach outlined is consistent with the vision to end poverty and the need for food banks? Is there anything else you think should be included?

We agree with the vision outlined in the draft national plan: "***Everyone has a sufficient and secure income to be able to access food that meets their needs and preferences.***" It is only through ensuring that everyone has an adequate income that allows them to live and to thrive that we will eradicate the need for foodbanks.

² <https://www.aberlour.org.uk/urgentassistancefund/>

³ https://www.aberlour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Evaluation-of-Aberlours-Urgent-Assistance-Fund_Professor-Morag-Treanor_November-2020.pdf

The preventative approach outlined within the draft national plan focused on increasing incomes through fair work and better routes into employment, further use of social security powers and mitigating living costs for those on low incomes is the correct one.

Rights Based Approach

Article 11 of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights⁴ outlines everyone's right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, and the fundamental right to be free from hunger. Similarly, Article 27 of the UNCRC⁵ insists that all children have the right to an adequate standard of living, including food. We welcome the rights-based approach that the draft national plan outlines in its aim to end the need for foodbanks.

We believe that delivering a rights-based national plan to end foodbanks can only be achieved by ensuring those who are experts by experience, who have experienced food insecurity and relied on foodbanks, must be at the centre of shaping and influencing that plan, its actions and how best to respond to meet the needs of people across Scotland experiencing food insecurity.

Increasing Incomes

Even prior to the pandemic, reduced household budgets for thousands of families across Scotland have made the provision of food for them and their children a daily challenge. We are clear that first and most direct way in which we can lift families out of poverty and prevent the need for foodbanks is by ensuring an income for all that allows families to thrive.

The commitment made by the Scottish Government to increase the incomes of low-income families by doubling the Scottish Child Payment to £20 per child per week will help lift thousands of families out of poverty. Alongside many other organisations, Aberlour campaigned for this and we know how much of a difference the increase in value of this vital benefit will make for eligible families across Scotland. The introduction of additional financial support, such as increasing the value of the Best Start Grant, Best Start Foods and School Clothing Grant, will guarantee more money in families' pockets to spend on what they choose is best for them and their children.

However, steps to increase family incomes will be greatly impacted by the current cost of living crisis. Even the increase to the Scottish Child Payment from April this year will not be enough to reduce child poverty to a level that would see an end to the need for foodbanks, or to meet statutory child poverty targets.

Therefore, there must be consideration of what additional actions are necessary within the plan to counteract any steep and ongoing rise in the costs of living and essential and basic goods (such as food and utilities) that will undermine the plan's ambition to end the need for foodbanks through increasing incomes. All evidence indicates further use of Scotland's social security powers will be necessary to help meet statutory child poverty targets⁶. We believe increasing the value of the Scottish Child Payment will continue to be the first and best way to increase incomes for low-income families, and as a result help to prevent the need for foodbanks.

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx>

⁵ <https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/unicef-convention-rights-child-uncrc.pdf>

⁶ <https://fraserofallander.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Child-poverty-report-final-200122.pdf>

Scottish Welfare Fund

Just like many charitable or hardship funds, such as Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund, demand on the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) has risen sharply as a result of the pandemic. This has exposed and highlighted a range of issues and concerns with the delivery and administration of the fund across the country.

The additional investment in SWF in response to Covid-19 was widely welcomed and much needed. SWF has been able to support many people in financial crisis, including significant numbers of those impacted by the financial effects of the pandemic. However, during the pandemic Aberlour and others, including the Poverty & Inequality Commission⁷, became concerned about issues and challenges many families across Scotland have had accessing SWF.

In October 2020, Aberlour provided joint evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Social Security Committee, along with One Parent Families Scotland and Child Poverty Action Group, to raise many shared concerns⁸. Key issues included: lack of consistency in delivery of SWF; apparent suspension of the community care grant element of SWF in some areas; accessibility issues regarding the application process; erroneous or lack of up to date information on local authority websites; limited knowledge or awareness of SWF locally; and lack of confidence that SWF could or would help those in financial crisis.

A number of outlined issues have persisted since before the pandemic. The work undertaken by Child Poverty Action Group and others, through the joint A Menu For Change programme⁹, previously highlighted issues in relation to the accessibility and administration of SWF. The pandemic has magnified these issues at a time when families in urgent financial need should find it easier to access support through SWF, but have experienced additional and increased challenges in getting the help they need.

We believe that SWF should play an important role as part of the wider welfare system in Scotland that can respond effectively to the needs of those in financial crisis. We also believe that SWF should provide a route to accessing additional support if necessary for those who require it. However, despite commitments made by the Scottish Government to conduct an independent review into the operation and delivery of SWF this has so far not taken place. We are concerned that the intention within the draft national plan to end the need for foodbanks relies on SWF functioning effectively as a support for those who may otherwise access foodbanks. We believe this will not be achievable as long as those issues persist and until SWF is working consistently for all those across Scotland who need it.

Holistic Support

We welcome the intention of the draft national plan to take a holistic approach to supporting those who experience food insecurity. It is correct that this should include help around welfare rights and money advice. Increasing family incomes is a vital part of how we tackle child poverty, but it is not a

⁷ <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Scottish-Welfare-Fund-briefing-.pdf>

⁸ https://yourviews.parliament.scot/session-5/role-of-social-security-in-covid19-recovery/consultation/view_respondent?uuld=816940400

⁹ <https://amenuforchange.files.wordpress.com/2020/01/a-menu-for-change-scottish-welfare-fund-briefing-.pdf>

silver bullet. It must be followed up by support to mitigate the impact of poverty and the many other issues that poverty can create or make worse.

A holistic approach to supporting families who need extra help and support must also ensure a combination of practical, emotional and financial support is available and accessible for those experiencing financial hardship and who experience food insecurity. Delivering holistic, whole-family support for all families who need extra help is vital to tackle the impact of poverty on families and to mitigate the wide-ranging symptoms of child poverty, including food insecurity.

Many families who access financial support through Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund are often struggling in other ways with the anxiety and stress caused, or exacerbated, by their financial circumstances. Beyond the immediate financial need some families may have, at Aberlour we often find that families require additional help and support in other ways. We recognise that families experiencing financial crisis who may seek help from charities or foodbanks will often need ongoing and additional help and support and that this will be on a longer-term basis than any immediate financial support can provide.

We believe the draft national plan can be strengthened by identifying actions that ensure a consistent and connected approach to meeting families' needs including, but not limited to, food insecurity. This can be best achieved by outlining how it aims to bring agencies and services together locally to support families, with a 'no wrong door' approach in response to and beyond their immediate financial circumstances. It is crucial that families are at the centre of and can exercise agency over what this looks like for them.

Cash First Approach

We welcome the intention to invest in a 'cash-first local partnership' approach that aims to make foodbanks the last port of call for those experiencing food insecurity. It is our experience that during the pandemic the third sector was best able to deliver direct cash support to families in financial crisis, through charitable and hardship funds, such as Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund. Third sector organisations have proven to be flexible and agile and often better able to respond to families' immediate needs at times of crisis, than local authority partners have been able to. We believe there is a role for third sector organisations who operate financial support funds to continue to play as part of a joined up local approach to supporting those in financial crisis, offering cash first solutions and mitigating the need for foodbanks.

However, we are concerned that the draft national plan intends to pilot the use of food vouchers in place of foodbank referrals. We do not believe this is consistent with the Scottish Government's stated commitment to ensuring a cash first approach in response to food insecurity¹⁰. As food insecurity is a symptom of poverty, any rights-based approach to ending the need for foodbanks must ensure that those experiencing food insecurity have enough money to provide for themselves and their family. Families tell us that alternatives to cash, such as vouchers, often do not meet their needs, are stigmatising and limit their options of what they can buy. Dignity and choice must be at the heart of the draft national plan. Families know what is best for them and their children and only a cash first approach can guarantee that for families.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-government-response-un-food-insecurity-poverty/pages/2/>

2. Do you think that the actions underway will help to reduce the need for food banks as a primary response to food insecurity?

Yes.

3. Do you think that the suggestions for what more we plan to do will help to reduce the need for food banks as a primary response to food insecurity?

Yes.

4. Is there anything else that you think should be done with the powers we have at a national or local level to reduce the need for food banks as a primary response to food insecurity?

As evidenced in the Scottish Government's own Ending Destitution Together strategy those with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) are at greatest risk of living in destitution and experiencing extreme financial hardship¹¹. Through Aberlour's Urgent Assistance Fund we have seen a significant increase in families with NRPF seeking financial help.

We believe the cash first principle should apply to any measures intended to provide financial assistance and support to **all** children and families experiencing financial hardship or living in poverty, and where possible this must include families with NRPF.

There have been many calls for the Scottish Government to provide support to these families using devolved social security powers or other discretionary measures. It has been argued that local authority powers which allow for the discretionary use of cash assistance should be used to target financial and practical support, at least equivalent to the value of the Scottish Child Payment, for families with NRPF, to promote children's wellbeing and to prevent these families from falling into poverty and destitution¹².

It is our opinion that provisions included under s.12 of the Social Security (Scotland) Act and s.22 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995¹³ should be used to develop a national scheme to provide support to these families, promote children's wellbeing and to prevent poverty and destitution. The Poverty and Inequality Commission has called on the Scottish Government to work with CoSLA "*to develop a national policy on the provision of support to those with no recourse to public funds through local authorities*".¹⁴

¹¹ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2021/03/ending-destitution-together/documents/ending-destitution-together-strategy-improve-support-people-no-recourse-public-funds-living-scotland-2021-2024/ending-destitution-together-strategy-improve-support-people-no-recourse-public-funds-living-scotland-2021-2024/govscot%3Adocument/ending-destitution-together-strategy-improve-support-people-no-recourse-public-funds-living-scotland-2021-2024.pdf>

¹² https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/end_child_poverty_manifesto_2021.pdf

¹³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-children-act-1995-regulations-guidance-volume-1-support-protection-children-families/pages/2/>

¹⁴ <https://povertyinequality.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Scottish-Welfare-Fund-briefing-.pdf>

We believe that the draft national plan should look to ensure a joined up national and local government approach using discretionary local government powers to guarantee equivalent support for families with NRPF who do not benefit from the formal social security system.¹⁵

5. Do you have any views on how we intend to measure impact, and what would give you confidence that we are moving in the right direction?

Evidencing progress made towards meeting both interim and statutory child poverty targets will provide a clear measure that child poverty is reducing and, as a result food insecurity should also reduce. Monitoring use of SWF and gathering local data on foodbank use and other forms of support for those experiencing food insecurity would provide useful evidence that foodbank use and the need for foodbanks is reducing.

6. Is there anything else that you think should be considered in the development of this plan?

Through our Urgent Assistance Fund we are beginning to see an increasingly worrying picture of families trapped in toxic cycles of debt to public bodies, such as local authorities and housing associations – and even schools. We anticipate the issue of public debt will only worsen as the cost of living crisis gets worse, and urge that there must be better support for families locked in persistent problem debt to public bodies. We think there should be consideration in the draft national plan of the role of public bodies in perpetuating debt that traps families in poverty. This could include actions that allow local authorities to better understand and know which families are most affected and where debt repayment is impacting on families' ability to provide food for their children and on wider family wellbeing.

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¹⁵ <https://socialworkscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/SWS-Prevention.pdf>