

What Scotland's policies can teach Westminster about fighting poverty

*There are new progressive anti-poverty policies in place in the UK but for much of the population, these are not accessible. Financial support should be based on the evidence and should apply to all those needing support – regardless of where they reside, argue **Ruth Patrick, Kate Andersen, Kitty Stewart and Emma Tominey**.*

The Chancellor's Autumn Statement has rightly been a focus of considerable analysis, as commentators and the public discuss and critique whether action taken will bolster the UK's fragile economy and support those struggling to get by on a low income, who face the prospect of a [long and difficult winter](#). Right across the UK, the [Chancellor's decision](#) to uprate benefits in line with inflation, to increase the living wage and to restore rates of Local Housing Allowance will make a difference to families' well-being over the coming months. At the same time, his readiness to deploy a [punitive and hostile rhetoric](#) as he announced yet another extension of benefit sanctions, and new measures to push people into work, will cause fear, anxiety and stigma for those targeted.

Importantly, though, while the measures in the Autumn Statement apply across the whole of the UK, families in some parts of the country are better insulated against poverty and hardship than others.

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The [devolution of some social security powers](#) has meant that Scotland has been able to forge a different path, introducing potentially transformative policy reforms which mean families with children living north of the border face a more hopeful future than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK. The [2018 Scottish Social Security Act](#) emphasised the importance of embedding dignity and respect in social security provision, a sharp contrast to the prevailing attitude to benefit recipients conveyed in the rhetoric of Westminster politicians, as evidenced in [Hunt's pre-budget media set pieces](#).

The Scottish model

Among new policies in Scotland designed to offer more secure financial support to those on a low income, the [Scottish Child Payment](#) (SCP) stands out as the most significant change. Introduced in February 2021 with the explicit aim of tackling child poverty, the SCP was initially set at £10 per week for children under six in families receiving income-related benefits. To help mitigate the cost-of-living crisis and the removal of the £20 uplift to Universal Credit, it was increased in April 2022 to £20 and then again in November 2022 to £25 per week. Significantly, it was also extended to all under-sixteens in eligible families. This means that a family on a low income with three children under 16 could receive a payment of £300 a month, raising their annual income to almost £4000 more than an equivalent family in England. [Campaigners in Scotland](#) are calling for the SCP to be increased further still, pushing for £40 per week per child to bullet-proof the poverty reducing potential of this policy.

Clearly, the SCP marks a substantial departure from the austerity which has dominated the social security landscape since 2010. It forms a central part of a more progressive use of tax-benefit powers in Scotland: [the Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates](#) that the bottom third of Scottish households with children will, on average, be around £2,000/year better off than similar English households. This is predicted to have a monumental impact on reducing child poverty rates: Oxford University's Danny Dorling has predicted that the increased and extended payments will transform Scotland from being one of the [most unequal places to live in Europe to being one of the most equal](#). In short: it's a big deal.

Elsewhere, however, the main political parties across England, Wales and Northern Ireland have been reluctant to commit to a similar investment in financial support for families living in poverty. There may be political reasons for this. The SCP is the brainchild of the Scottish National Party, so even if the policy objectives to lower child poverty align with those of other parties such as Labour, these parties have been reluctant so far to commit to expanding the SCP within Scotland, or to incorporating the cash transfers into England or Wales.

But [news that Rocio Cifuentes](#), the Children's Commissioner for Wales, is recommending ministers to adopt similar cash transfers for low-income families with

children outside of Scotland, is encouraging. In England and Wales, one in three children live in poverty – rising to nearly half of children in lone parent or ethnic minority households. Parties wanting to explore anti-poverty strategies need to learn from what is happening across the UK, and the SCP represents a major intervention which would merit sustained analysis.

Looking at the evidence on benefits

Importantly, the Scottish Government's decision to introduce the Scottish Child Payment aligns with research evidence on the difference additional cash support for children can make. There is substantial [evidence](#) that generous child benefits are an effective way to reduce child poverty and improve children's well-being and opportunities. For example, [research](#) on a previous UK expansion in financial support for families, the introduction of the child tax credit in the early 2000s, found that the money was spent on the children – on fresh fruit and vegetables and on children's clothes, toys and activities. Meanwhile spending on alcohol and tobacco actually fell.

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[Research](#) has also found that poverty has a negative effect on maternal depression, stress and anxiety. And a number of [studies](#) point to improvements in children's educational outcomes and social and emotional outcomes as family incomes rise.

Despite this evidence base, the role of cash benefits to families in securing child well-being remains hotly contested. The lack of political consensus on the issue is evident in the [cuts we have seen to children's benefits](#) in the UK across the last decade – and in the very real possibility that they may be cut again in real terms this week.

The difference a few miles can make

In this context, evaluating the effects of the Scottish Child Payment is crucial. The differences among the UK's devolved areas provide a rare opportunity to undertake intra-UK comparative analysis, exploring how the policy changes may lead to different outcomes for those who do and do not receive this additional support.

It is a direct consequence of devolution that the position of otherwise identical families will diverge depending on where they happen to live. Let's make sure we take advantage of this opportunity to learn more about the difference such policies can make – ensuring that the policy lessons of the Scottish Child Payment can help improve the lives and outcomes of children throughout the UK and beyond. All eyes may have been on the Chancellor when he delivered his Autumn Statement, but we must not lose sight of the effects of policy interventions happening hundreds of miles from Westminster.

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