

Scottish Labour Policy Forum

Focus on the Future

Includem Response

includem 

January 2025



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Our mission: To provide the support young people need to make positive changes in their lives, and inspire a more hopeful future for young people, their families and communities.

Our vision: A world where every young person is respected, valued, and has the opportunity to actively participate in all aspects of life and society.

Our Promise to children, young people and families: We will always listen to you, we will do what we say, we will fight for your future, and we are with you every step of the way.

Includem are a Scottish charity that work with children, young people and families to help them transform their lives. We support children, young people (aged 0-26) and families across Scotland to make positive life choices and progress towards the type of future they want to live.

To do this, we work with communities, social services, schools and a variety of partners and statutory services to identify which children, young people and families could benefit from our support. We then engage the child or young person and their family or carer to develop a package of support, tailored to their specific needs.

Currently we provide services in Aberdeen, Dundee, East Dunbartonshire, Fife, Glasgow, Stirling, Tayside and West Dunbartonshire as well as our includem RESPONSE service which provides support across Scotland. These services work across a range of areas including youth justice, health, education, early intervention and prevention, intensive support and more.

Our support is unique to each individual. We don't use a 'one size fits all' approach when it comes to helping children, young people and families to achieve positive outcomes.

We employ over 180 members of staff in full and part time positions on various contracts. We make a significant contribution to the economy both locally and nationally.

This submission reflects and amplifies the voices of those we support.

If you would like to discuss any of our response, please get in touch with Martyn Walker, Communications & Public Affairs Manager at publicaffairs@includem.co.uk.



Commission 1: **Building an Economic Powerhouse to Improve Lives**

Includem provides holistic, family support to children, young people and families, working to improve their lives. We are both a charity and business **who will face devastating consequences due to the impending changes to employers National Insurance Contributions and the lowering of the threshold.** We strongly urge that a potential Scottish Labour Government should look to support the third sector with these changes.

The third sector in Scotland is an economic power and function which improve lives daily. It is a major employer which is pivotal to the Scottish economy – and shouldn't be ignored.

In terms of building an economic powerhouse to improve lives, we believe that Scottish Labour should consider the following:

- **Invest in Scotland's vibrant third sector by committing to longer-term funding.** We believe that to bring about systemic and cultural change, funding of the third sector should, at minimum, last for 5 years. For maximum and more realistic impact, 10-year fundings is ideal. In doing so, you would ensure the sector has the ability to influence and implement systemic change, ensure viability and job security for highly trained and valuable staff – keeping unemployment levels low, allow medium and long term planning to support children, young people and families, support retention and recruitment of staff, support the management of resources and implement the values and principles of GIRFEC.

Women are more likely to be employed in the third sector than men, further contributing to gender inequality in income and job security. Further, women are predominantly primary caregivers for children and young people in Scotland. Investing in the third sector and committing to longer-term funding would go some way towards creating a more equal society.

The lack of and uncertainty over longer-term funding has a significant impact on our cash-flow and our financial sustainability. Even when a long-term contract has been awarded in theory, in practice this is usually a 3+1+1+1+1 arrangement which continues the pressures already faced.

Funding arrangements should also reflect inflationary pressures, annual increases and competitive staff benefits and Terms and Conditions. This would remove the need for organisation such as ours to absorb these costs from core funding. This is crucial if we are to move towards financial sustainability and adhere to Fair Work First requirements.

The UK Government's Fair Work Agenda is laudable; however, it can be a burden for small businesses and in particular the third sector. For example, local authority and government contracts pricing does not reflect the costs associated with ongoing training, innovation or increase in pay awards – areas which are vital to staff retention within the sector. These costs are ultimately absorbed by us to the



detriment of the support we can provide children, young people and families and create a challenging financial situation.

- **Invest in specialist support employment programmes for those historically inactive** (such as those with a physical or learning disability) which current employability programmes are not tailored for. We know these programmes are largely underfunded in Scotland however, they deliver better job outcome results than the current employability programmes.
- **Invest in an employer led skills development framework** which addresses the skill gap to the current demand for open jobs. The current higher/future education courses are not designed to meet current/future labour market needs.
- **Invest in supported and paid work placements** to support first time employment and/or those returning to work after long term unemployment.
- Create **more opportunities for apprenticeships** across different fields of expertise. We recognise that in doing so, more needs to be done by public bodies and the private sector to sell the value of apprenticeships to young people. Young people have told us that the options available to them are limited and too narrow in scope and focus. We would particularly be keen to see the introduction of “pre apprenticeship” training which will provide young people with the skills they will need to succeed in their apprenticeships. Otherwise, we will continue to set them up to fail and continue the vicious cycle.
- **Provide financial incentives to organisations that reduce the costs of apprenticeship** training through in-house training and development leading to retention and upskilling of staff.
- Recognise that there continues to be a focus on academic achievement. We know from our experience that not every child and young person succeeds in the education environment with the pressures of academic achievement impacting their health and physical wellbeing. As such we would **recommend introducing shorter more vocationally focussed courses**.
- **Support employers to invest and to encourage the recruitment of non-skilled workers**, subsidising upskilling which is specifically tailored to the relevant industry.
- We also strongly urge Scottish Labour to consider **enhancing the current community benefits requirements** when awarding infrastructure or other such contracts including:
 - Inclusion of a **clause requiring any successful bidder to undertake “trauma informed training”** creating trauma informed workforces and societies.
 - **Commit to employ young people in areas where programmes and projects are taking place**. This would include pre-apprenticeship preparations plus young apprenticeships. We would suggest that focus particularly should be made on areas of highest deprivation and the care experienced community.



- **Commit to job and training placements during the life of contracts** that have been awarded, with particular focus on care experienced young people.

- We also know that **to build an economic powerhouse needs a strong infrastructure to support it. We would encourage a Labour Scottish Government to examine the current planning infrastructure.** Through our work in responding to the National Planning Framework 4 Consultation in 2022¹, families told us that key issues they faced were basic resourcing issues including housing and transport. We believe in 20-minute neighbourhoods which are practical and support families in their day to day lives. **We strongly encourage a Labour Scottish Government to examine the current transport structure in Scotland.** We hear repeatedly from young people and families about the length of their journeys to get to and from school, college or work and the number of impractical journeys that exist. **Transport should be seamless and linked between providers of rail, bus, cycle and ferry.**

¹ <https://includem.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Includem-NPF4-consultation.pdf>



Commission 2: A Modern NHS and Social Care System that Puts People at the Centre

Prevention

We agree that the third sector plays a significant role in enabling and supporting prevention and would argue that as well as prevention, the third sector provides early intervention support which ultimately reduces the cost of long-term intervention to the taxpayer.

Examples of good practice in early intervention and prevention is our partnership with NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde in providing the Glasgow City Youth Health Service Multiple Risk Programme and our NHS Wellbeing Service.

The Multiple Risk Programme works with young people aged 12-19 who have been referred either by their GP, school or have self-referred. The programme is delivered across nine locations in Glasgow: Drumchapel, Easterhouse, Gorbals, Govan, Maryhill, Pollok, Possilpark, Shettleston and Springburn. In recognition of the barriers that young people can face in attending appointment-based services, we also provide 'outreach' support to young people and their families. Critical to the programme's success has been the fact that support is provided across a range of services, in a shared location.

Our Multiple Risk Workers, **support young people through a one-to-one approach to identify issues and the underlying causes that contribute to their risk-taking – and often unsafe – behaviours.** From this, the young person is supported to set goals and to develop a personal support plan. A central pillar of this support is includem's *A Better Life* toolkit. Our toolkit provides both practical and emotional support for young people to achieve their goals and to recognise their strengths. Key themes include recognising and managing emotions, health & wellbeing, beating boredom, independent living, problem alcohol and substance use, and risky behaviour. This support takes into consideration the level of risk-taking which is completely 'normal' and healthy.

The Multiple Risk programme has been successful and has prevented young people in Glasgow from experiencing deeper (and costly) issues. Since its launch, it has helped young people with issues such as alcohol and drug misuse, vaping, risk of offending, and non-engagement in education and employment. The programme has proved to be popular with a significant waiting list for the service now in effect.

Finally, a more recent example of the third sector coming together and playing a significant role in enabling prevention is through our participation in **Project Switch.**

Following the murder of a young person in the East End of Glasgow and the impact that this has had on their peers who witnessed this traumatic event, multi-agency partners including includem and The Spark, came together to provide 15 weeks of support for the young people involved providing counselling, group work and further support for their families and the wider community.

This preventative approach recognised the impact that an event such as the death of a young person can have in escalating violence and embedding trauma within the community. It



also recognised that when a first responder is witness to a tragic event, they are offered support, support which is not available to those involved or other witnesses.

Social Care and Social Work

Social Care in Scotland **is** integral in improving and delivering an efficient NHS. We agree that social work has become devalued in recent years, and we notice this daily.

Organisations like includem, support thousands upon thousands of children, young people and families on a daily basis and contribute to the Scottish economy.

We are concerned of the lack of understanding on what social care is.

Social care is the support provided by public organisations and private companies to individuals, families and communities who need assistance with daily living activities – from cradle to grave. It covers topics such as Residential Care, Home Care, Respite Care, Child Protection Services, Support for Carers, Housing Support, Mental Health Support, and support of Independent Living. Services which are crucial for supporting individuals, families, communities and vulnerable groups – ensuring they can live fulfilling lives despite their challenges.

There are many unknowns regarding the Scottish Government's National Care Service.

One of the major unknowns is the impact the proposed service will have on children and young people's services such as includem.

We have frequently raised awareness on this issue and continue to have unanswered questions.

Includem believes that **any potential reform to social care must consider the following four key areas** if it is to work for children, young people and families as we examined in our *Voices (2022)* report:

- **Poverty**

There must be consideration of both the economic and social factors that block access to human rights and as a result widen the poverty related wellbeing gap. Low wages, inadequate social security, cuts to support and structural inequalities result in a postcode lottery of services and safety. It is critical to address these areas to alleviate the pressures families we support experience and mitigate the impact this has on their physical and mental health.

- **Trust**

Any potential social care reform must be built to respond to the needs of those which seeks its support, rather than the requirement of a system or its institutions. This will require flexibility and responsiveness based on individual and family needs. At any potential reform's core must be the recognition of whole family support with clear communication, and a commitment to fostering a culture of informed consent.



- **Complexity**

There are considerable gaps and complexity in services – particularly in early intervention. This limits the support between social work and CAMHS, for example, which results in families reaching crisis points before support - like includem's - can help. Closer integration between health, education, social care, family support and youth justice are paramount for effective and early intervention. This, we believe, was not recognised by the National Care Service which excluded early years and education services.

Any reform must ensure it addresses rather than reinforces existing gaps and the disconnect that exists between statutory services. It must be responsive and in place before families reach crisis point. This includes access to early intervention, investment in a range of community-based supports and family advocates with skills in preventative approaches in cases of complex needs.

- **Investment**

While the potential for additional resources that the Scottish Government's National Care Service set out was welcome, there are real concerns on **how** this resource would have been allocated.

With children's services distinct from adult services, includem is concerned that any integration of children's services risks a lack of parity in funding. Children's services must be given equal status to adult services – recognising the significance of our earliest experiences in life to our wellbeing, health and ability to thrive. We strongly recommend that resourcing early intervention and prevention services such as includem's, to avoid more costly intervention down the line.

Rather than develop new organisational structures, **we believe that investment should be driven by, and focused on, improvement to existing support services.** This will embed real cultural change and focus investment into children's services where innovation and partnership working need to continue being promoted, rather than competition as created by current tendering and procurement processes.

Any potential reform has the potential to strengthen a coherent approach in improvement and design which would seek to ringfence resources to guide complex change and innovation. Structural change will not be effective without change to workforce conditions, giving them the time and space to provide proper support in this highly valuable and skilled work. **We would urge any potential Scottish Government to not be constrained over the fear of failure, they must be bolder in their ambitions to bring about successful and long-lasting change.**



Commission 3: From Cradle to Career: Giving Young People the Best Start in Life

School Curriculum

Our experience working with children and young people in some of the most deprived areas in Scotland confirms the link between poverty and poor attainment within education.

Although the Hayward Review was welcomed, the focus of the review was too narrow. We would argue that subject choice and availability needs to be reviewed, particularly for school in areas of the highest deprivation which see limited subject choice as found by the University of Stirling.²

This could perhaps be achieved by pooling resources with other schools, or through using remote learning to connect students across geographical areas.

Attention should be paid to not only the individuals' strengths but also their choice. Further attention should also be given to additional support for learning, an area which many of the children and young people we support are increasingly involved in.

There are measures we would like to see introduced to support children living in poverty and to help them attend and learn in school includes:

- **Free Universal School Meals:** Not only will this help in issues of school focus, but it will also ensure that children and young people receive at least one substantial meal. This will also help reduce the burden of school meals on parents on low incomes. Providing free universal school meals removes stigma, something that currently hinders children, young people and families from accessing these provisions.
- **End school exclusions:** Exclusions can significantly impact a child or young person's future outcomes and wellbeing. The Promise made an early commitment to end exclusions for care experienced students by March 2024 which has sadly been missed. We believe that any future Scottish Government should make it an ambition to end school exclusion for all.
- **Review the use of part-time timetables:** A number of children and young people includem supports attend school on a part-time basis. This could be because of behaviour in school or other conditions imposed on the child and young person. Part-time timetables are a different form of exclusion. They limit a child or young person's social interactions and impact their health and wellbeing. Children and young people we have spoken to have told us that part-time timetables do not encourage them to attend school and act as a barrier to attainment. We urge a Labour Scottish Government to examine the impact of part-time timetables on school attainment and instead work with children and young people to design a system of flexible, child-led timetables that support the individual child or young person's needs.
- **Increase whole family support:** By investing in whole family support – such as services provided by includem – we can support children and young people at risk of

² <https://www.stir.ac.uk/news/2023/february-2023-news/curriculum-for-excellence-research-results/>



exclusion and/or on the fringes of offending behaviour. Taking a whole family approach recognises the need for support not just in the school environment but at home and in the local community. Children and young people have told us that it can be difficult to attend and engage with school when difficulties at home are not known by schools or when schools disregard their family circumstances.

- **Expand the use of restorative practices:** We know the benefits that restorative practice can make to a child or young person. Restorative conversations not just between peers, but between pupils and staff could lead to stronger relationships and help young people feel that they can put mistakes behind them and build an environment that allows them to thrive.
- **Increase teacher training:** We believe that training should be made available to teachers to understand why children and young people are behaving the way they are. This will help develop healthy relationships and forge meaningful connections.

In our experience, transitions for post-school are poorly supported for young people we work with. We have experience in transition services designed for young people and will work with young people who are transition from school on building their skills for independent living. This could include how to budget, how to food shop, how to set up a bank account and manage other responsibilities. More support should be made available to school leavers and the Scottish Government should examine partnerships with organisations like includem on improve experiences of transitions.

Access to Culture, Music and Sports

Many of the children, young people and families we support will often miss out on experiences because of circumstances that are beyond their control. This includes cultural events, music and sports.

That is where organisations like includem play a major role.

As part of our whole family support, we will provide memory making experiences for the children, young people and families we work with. This has included trips to local zoos, carnivals, the cinema, mini golf and more.

We also rely on the support of other organisations and groups like Jags for Good – the Partick Thistle FC Supporters Group who donate to includem family season tickets for families we support to experience a game of football. We have also received panto tickets from local theatres and more of which we know families greatly appreciate. Research shows cultural events such as these can have a hugely positive impact on future life chances and more needs to be done in this area.

In 2011, we recognised that those we supported were missing out on these moments and that is why we launched our Young Person's Fund which is dedicated to providing extra support those we support, who don't have the luxury of taking things for granted.

Through our Young Person's Fund, we can provide funding – both directly and in cash - for children, young people and families to enjoy day's out or new experiences such as swimming lessons, memberships to gyms and more. Unfortunately, since the pandemic, the



Young Person's Fund has become more of a crisis fund, there to support families in their hour of need by supporting with the payment of bills, emergency food parcels, household essentials and even suitable clothing. In 2023/24, we distributed £9,100 through our Young Person's Fund.

In addition to our Young Person's Fund, we have historically arranged the includem Fun Day. Our Fun Day brought families together to enjoy a bunch of activities including bouncy castles, petting zoos, sand art, football and more. This was often the only day they could spend as a family doing activities together. Due to the prohibitive costs, we have been unable to provide a Fun Day since 2022.

We would urge any potential Labour Scottish Government to consider establishing a Third Sector Access to Culture Fund which could support organisations in providing access for those they work with to cultural and other significant events that other families experience. This will ensure no family is left out due to circumstances beyond control and could significantly reduce instances of stigma, shame and stress that families can feel when not being able to provide such experiences.

Additional Support Needs

Many of the children and young people includem supports, meet the criteria for Additional Support Needs (ASN) under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004. This is due to either being care experienced or having experience of trauma which has resulted in mental health and wellbeing needs.

We believe that the increase in children with ASN is down to a number of factors including the rise in poverty, traumatic experiences, legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic and community deprivation to name but a few.

We support the definition of ASN taking into consideration care experience and other barriers and additional challenges children and young people face when trying to access education. However, care must be taken for this not to be stigmatising as children and young people report feeling excluded from mainstream activities and opportunities and being treated differently from their peers. Young people we spoke to told us that they wanted more support in the classroom but also to be able to ask for it, rather than being targeted exclusively.

We know of too many children and young people who could benefit – and should by virtue of their circumstances and experiences, by receiving additional support for learning but on account of resourcing issues do not. In many examples, children and young people who experience difficulties in the classroom do not receive the support they need if they are waiting on formal diagnosis, which we know can be a lengthy process as a result of high NHS and CAMHS waiting times.

We would urge any potential Labour Scottish Government to invest in additional support for learning for all schools, particularly those in the most deprived areas of Scotland. This should include at minimum one additional support teacher per class and two speech



and language therapists per school. This support should be available to all children and young people and not dependent on a diagnosis of any kind.

Training for teachers and all school staff on additional support needs must be mandatory and high-standard to ensure that everyone who meets and engages with children and young people are equipped to support them adequately, regardless of their role. We know from teachers that training in this regard is lacking in depth, quality and is often overlooked despite being critical to the successful engagement of children and young people in education.

In addition, we would also encourage any potential Labour Scottish Government to review existing data sharing protocols in place so that schools can better support children and young people through communication with parents, third sector support providers, and other statutory services.

Disengagement with School

We have deep experience of working with children and young people who are disengaged with school. Our talented and experienced teams work hard to establish trusting relationships with those they support, giving them a safe space to understand why they are experiencing the issues they face, and how to manage them as far as possible. As such we feel that we are well placed to share our learning and experience on this issue.

We believe that a lack of support in their home environment, lack of mental health support and provision and declining resources for additional support for learning are just some of the reasons why absenteeism and disengagement with education is on the rise, particularly with students from lower-income backgrounds.

Working with children and young people we also know that young people want to be offered learning opportunities beyond the traditional subjects offered to them and want to have opportunities that focus on preparing them for life and adulthood and offer them a place to breathe. These are areas which are frequently explored during includem's support through our Independent Living module of our A Better Life toolkit. It is important to us that if a potential Labour Scottish Government wishes to examine this further, they should engage with children and young people we support who are rarely consulted or heard in these discussions.

For any meaningful solution to be found, the government should carry out a wide-reaching participation process with children and young people, involving third sector organisations such as includem who can act as trusted facilitators ensuring every child and young person is given a voice.

We frequently hear from young people about their feeling of 'other-ness' which can lead to disruptive behaviours. This could be as a result of measures such as school exclusions, part-time timetables, school meals, impact of poverty and the growing cost of the school day.



Children and young people need access to pro-social modelling and better relationships with teachers and staff in schools; empathy and support for experiences at home and in the community, and restorative practices in schools supported by third sector organisations.

In our experience, issues that lead to disruptive behaviour and violence in schools are best supported through whole-family support provisions available to children, families and their school communities. We know that when there is the proper support for young people and their families, with the time to understand disruptive behaviour and the root causes, this behaviour decreases. We also know that providing this support can lead to better engagement too.

Schools can better engage learners through tailored support and learning. **A Labour Scottish Government should explore reducing class sizes.** In doing so, it will allow more 1-2-1 support between pupil and teacher. **We would also like to see greater numbers of teaching assistants being recruited, a greater variety of subject choices especially in areas of high deprivation, better bullying policies and support, and school buildings that support learning and encourage wellbeing.**

As noted previously, our earlier response on the School Curriculum questions would also positively impact on disengagement and behaviour issues within an education setting.

We believe that more financial support is needed by families to help their child attend school and to engage whilst they are there. This includes:

- **Support of digital inclusion.**

In our *Staying Connected* (2020) report, we found that social isolation and being digitally excluded led to children and young people being disengaged from education.

Although carried out during the first lockdown, the findings are still relevant today:

- **20% of those surveyed did not have access to all the devices that they needed** – sometimes sharing one device between them as they could not afford to replace breakages or simply could not afford multiple devices. We also found that if families did have access to devices, not everyone had the confidence or knowledge in how to use them.
- **33% told us they did not feel they would be able to afford the ongoing costs.**
- **Only 16% could access the internet via mobile data.**
- **11% did not have a device that had video call functionality** with 1 in 4 saying using video calling would impact their data allowance to significantly to be able to use.

We would like to see the introduction of a programme similar to Connecting Scotland. This new programme would include third sector organisations who could identify children, young people and families from disadvantaged backgrounds who would receive a device and be provided with training and ongoing support.



We would like to see the introduction of a programme similar to Connecting Scotland. As part of our Family Finances research (2025), 69% of respondents reported struggling to pay for internet access. **Broadband should be economically accessible for all.**

Includem would also welcome the Scottish Government's support to encourage public and private sector bodies and organisations to support digital inclusion. This could be done through the donation of unused equipment which would be distributed through third sector organisations. Under this scheme, these bodies could also provide support to families through community training sessions, drop-in sessions and repairs and replacements.

- **Increased support for school clothing grants.**

Whilst we welcome the introduction of the Scottish Government's new uniform guidance in 2024, the level of school clothing grant has remained the same since 2021 - £120 for primary school pupils and £150 for secondary school pupils. This is despite the cost-of-living crisis and the rise in inflation. As any parent/carer knows, children go through many items of clothing in a year, often due to wear and tear or through outgrowing them.

For the families we support, 52% told us in our recent Family Finances research that they struggled to pay for costs related to school – including the cost of school uniform.

We would like to see a Labour Scottish Government double the school clothing grant or at minimum increase in line with inflation for those from a disadvantaged background. The payment should also be changed from a one-off payment to a more flexible payment which recognises that not all children grow to order.

In doing so, will also reduce the stigmatisation many children and young people experience for not wearing the “in” brands and could play a part in reducing disruptive behaviours also.

- **Provision of Universal Free School Meals.**

We have already stated in this submission our opinions on Universal Free School Meals.

However, **we would also urge a Labour Scottish Government to examine what could be done to support children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who are entitled to free school meals but are not attending school.** We cannot let children and young people go hungry simply because they're not in the right place. **A Labour Scottish Government should explore options similar to the Meals on Wheels for families entitled to free school meals but experiencing difficulties** and who are unlikely to visit their local food bank. Failing that, they should **provide adequate funding to third sector organisations who support these**



children, young people and families with “Meals for All” funding, ensuring that third sector organisations can continue to go that extra mile.

Organisations such as includem work to support individual children and young people to overcome barriers to non-attendance.

Examples of what this work involves include:

- Providing supportive and nurturing relationships in and outside of school.
- Reinforcing and nurturing the importance of belonging in and outside of school – including work to identify positive peer influences.
- Support next steps thinking – many of the children and young people we support are at increased risk of leaving school early and/or without qualifications. A number of them stop attending school before they reach an age where alternative education (such as colleges courses) is available to them. We support them to think about what the next steps in their lives are, to set themselves goals, and work towards these goals.
- Use of restorative practices – these are used to resolve conflicts between students, providing a safe space to explore their feelings and consequences. In our Schools Experience report we called for restorative practices to be embedded in all schools.

Data

We believe that there is currently enough data being collected regarding education in Scotland.

However, this data could be more usable. The current data – such as those on attainment for ASN, SIMD, exclusions etc – are collected in a way that is not usable for researchers and those within the policy field. This inadvertently creates data gatekeepers who are able to process the data but only when relevant to their own needs. As such **a Labour Scottish Government should examine the ways data is collected and explore the use of OpenSource data if possible.**

We would welcome the introduction of data dashboards. These could be used to improve data on attainment and achievement, making them open and accessible for all allowing researchers to choose how they analyse the data. They would be well-designed with metrics best reflecting attainment, poverty indicators, class, race, gender etc.

There are, however, arguments to be made about how meaningful standardised testing is and how achievement should be understood more broadly. This includes arguments that are made about how standardised testing is discriminatory and benefits a certain type of young person. There is a complex relationship between data collection and how we measure achievement and attainment. If we simplify education indicators, do we also need to simplify how we gauge attainment and achievement? If we broaden how we understand attainment and achievement, will this make education data too complex to be usable on an aggregate level? We understand that these are difficult questions and would welcome further discussion to explore them.



In our opinion, **we would also like to see an increase in GDPR training and awareness.** This should be done for all sectors in Scotland through a publicity awareness campaign. As it stands, many organisations can be over-cautious with how they interpret the GDPR regulations which can lead to “passing of the buck” when it comes to data sharing agreements. We have experience of other organisations easily blaming others for being too cautious or not cautious enough, removing the impetus for simple solutions. This training should also provide clarity on the ways that data sharing can be established within legislation. We believe that if GDPR training and awareness are increased, this may lead to streamlined cooperation and data sharing.

Care Experienced Children

We know that children and young people who are care-experienced, will experience the same difficulties that those living in poverty will face, if not more. From our work across Scotland, we are aware of the difference in provision and access to support which is available to care experienced children.

Care experienced children and young people don't always have access to the same technology, the same support for learning, or access to environments that support learning and studying. In our experience, the kind of support care experienced children and young people need in order to engage with education have featured heavily throughout our submission.

In our response to Commission 1, we spoke about increasing the provision of apprenticeships. In particular, **we believe that more support should be given to those who are care experienced in securing an apprenticeship.** These should not be limited to traditional trades but also widened to third sector organisations, public bodies and the private sector, with guaranteed employment at the end of their apprenticeship training.

Includem have been working with The Promise to deliver a pan-Scotland project since October 2023. Our project revolved around Community Mapping, finding out who is doing what, and to what level. From there we have worked to build relationships to ensure support children, young people and families is delivered effectively.

This project was established after we had identified gaps within the implementation of The Promise which include:

- Local Authorities and statutory bodies do not have a coherent plan to deliver the commitments of The Promise. **We believe that significantly more effort than what was initially planned is required to fully deliver The Promise.**
- **More support is needed for the workforce to implement the findings of The Promise and to deliver Plan 24-30.**

It is our opinion that the knowledge and insight of care experienced young people has been recorded frequently but the change that is needed is slow to happen. The community would welcome seeing change happen rather than spoken about.



Mental Health

There is no denying that poverty impacts the mental health of children and young people. Children and young people's wellbeing is significantly influenced by their surrounding environment.

There have been many reports published that detail the impact of poverty on children and young people with evidence to show that children and young people who are living in poverty are more likely to be bullied at school impacting their self-esteem, self-confidence, and impacting their wellbeing for the future.

We witness time and time again, children and young people worrying and stressed for their families and caregivers, experiencing chaotic home environments or suffering significant trauma. These all have a significant impact on mental health and wellbeing.

No child, young person or family should experience this.

Since 2020, we have been actively involved in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people across all our services but most notably in Fife.

We are a lead partner in Fife Council's Our Minds Matter project, delivering the **Keeping Connected** service which covers the entirety of the local authority. Keeping Connected is an early intervention and prevention, community-based service which supports those aged 10-18 years old to develop their self-confidence and to build resilience. Our aim is to promote positive mental health and wellbeing and to reduce stress across Fife.

Referrals are received from partner organisations and by self-referral. The service operates 8am-10pm, 365 days a year. During the period of 2020-2024 the project has supported 227 children and young people. The service is popular and frequently requires a waiting list to be put in place.

Keeping Connected can support a child or young person experiencing distressing factors such as anxiety, attachment, bereavement or loss, depression, emotional and behavioural difficulties, gender identity, repetitive/perseverative behaviours, self-harm, self-injury, substance use and Trauma.

Our team spends time with the child or young person to understand what is important to them. We help them identify other community supports such as youth clubs and groups, ensuring wider support is available to them when they move on from our support.

Includem and Our Minds Matter's Keeping Connected Service is a shining example of the value that third sector services can provide to public sectors. Especially as most local authorities battle with long waiting lists for CAMHS support, under resourcing of school counsellors and more.

We strongly urge a potential Labour Scottish Government to roll out community support services like Keeping Connected on a national level ensuring adequate and long-term funding is made available to third sector organisations to successfully deliver this.



Youth Work/Anti-Social Behaviour

Includem has a long history of providing youth work, supporting children and young people who are engaging in anti-social behaviour.

In East Dunbartonshire, our **ConnectEd** programme supports young people who are at risk of engaging in anti-social behaviour to improve their skills, confidence and make positive choices whilst providing an opportunity for whole community engagement. This service, funded through the UK Government Shared Prosperity Fund via the Glasgow City Region and East Dunbartonshire Council, is entirely voluntary for young people to engage with as workers from the project are present in the community, getting to know young people in areas that they frequent - without the need for referrals or intervention from statutory services.

To maximise engagement, includem undertook work to identify ‘hotspots’, where young people were spending most of their time and focused their presence on these areas.

To supplement this work and to reduce the number of young people “out on the streets” of their local communities - particularly during the winter months - drop-in sessions were made available in a Community and Education Centre, where our team engages with young people in meaningful in-depth discussions using issue-based activities and structured learning through the Hi-5/Dynamic Youth Award. During the summer months, activities such as boxing, football sessions and pop-up events were organised to further engage with young people.

Young people tell us that regularly are struggling to find meaningful activities to engage in, particularly in the evenings and at weekends. By working with young people at risk of involvement in anti-social behaviour, through voluntary participation and engagement, we have created opportunities for positive activities and development for young people in East Dunbartonshire.

The **Proposed Youth Work (Scotland) Bill** is promising in its proposal to enshrine the right to youth work in legislation, and the creation of ring-fenced funding.

However, critical to the youth work sector is **sustainable funding**. This will ensure these services are sustainable and can attract highly skilled workers.

We believe that a Labour Scottish Government should work with young people on defining youth work – what it is, what it does and fundamentally, how it will ensure it will meet the needs of young people who are most at risk.

As suggested in other sections of this submission, data sharing between schools and other services, including the third sector, must be improved to facilitate better identification and support of children and young people who could benefit from youth work.

We propose that youth workers should have free access to school facilities for the purpose of activities run by and for young people. For this to be effective they must be delivered outwith school hours and independently from the school administration to ensure



uptake. Specifically, **any such activity or group should also be made available at no extra cost to families and funded by either the Scottish Government or the local authority.**

Simultaneously, community spaces must be available at free of charge for use of activities by youth workers for individual and group work. These spaces must be easily accessible, non-stigmatising, and meet the needs of young people to ensure engagement.

Programmes of youth work **must be universal** however, there should be targeted support for at risk groups such as young people in conflict with the law, young people from the LGBTI+ community, care experienced young people, and young people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

Youth work is instrumental in supporting learning and complementing formal education. For many young people, engagement in youth work contributes to readiness for work, forms a crucial aspect of a young person's life, particularly those young people who have experienced barriers to school attainment.

Critically though, **youth work must also be made available for children and young people who are not attending school or are facing additional barriers to attending school.** These young people are often most at risk of being isolated, lack guidance and support, and engage in anti-social behaviour. This requires data sharing beyond schools and for improved partnership working between statutory services and partners. In order to make this happen, **a sustainable and long term funded third sector is critical.**

Having a Home

As everyone is aware, Scotland is experiencing a national housing emergency³ which is directly impacting the young people we support. Put simply, there are not enough homes being built or available across the country.

We regularly witness the impact that issues relating to housing have on children, young people and families. From overcrowding to mould and damp, we witness it all. We also witness, young people struggling to get on the property ladder – including our own employees.

A Labour Scottish Government must ensure more homes are built. Whether these are private, social or mixed. These homes should be affordable to all, and we would like to see support given in particular to young people to access their own home. This could be done by **increasing the support already available to first-time buyers and the reintroduction of the First Home Scheme.**

Although any young person can be at risk of homelessness including those from a LGBTI+ background, we are particularly concerned for children and young people who are care experienced who are at greater risk of becoming homeless.

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cy9x987jn77o>



Further support should be made available to them to support independent living, skills and experiences these young people may lack as a result of their care experience. Independent living skills include managing bills, tenancies and support for mental health and wellbeing. We envisage that this could be done through the **creation of a Care Experience Independent Living Fund** which could provide the financial support required for the first two years of a care experienced young person either owning their own home or gaining their first tenancy. This would be in addition to the Care Leaver Payment. It is imperative that any such scheme should be simple to apply for and be shaped by the voices of those who are care experienced. The Scottish Government should also ensure that this new fund would not replace the Section 29 monies that should be made available by local authorities.

We would also like to see **the rights and advocacy of tenants strengthened** including areas that were covered by the Scottish Government's A New Deal for Tenants. Too often young people are forced to live in accommodation that is not safe and would not be considered adequate for someone not reliant on the housing system. A culture change, based on the right to adequate, safe housing must underpin any work done to improve access to housing for young people.



Commission 4: More Equal and Safer Communities Where We Can All Thrive

Social Justice

Immediate actions that a new Labour Scottish Government could take to reduce poverty and to tackle the cost-of-living crisis in Scotland include:

- **Take radical action to transform the lives of children and young people by writing off public sector debt.**

Since 2021, we have been calling for the Scottish Government to use the powers it has to explore the feasibility of writing off public sector debt. Doing this would support the poorest families living in Scotland, including those supported by includem, and end the debt trap.

Public Sector debt is defined as debts and arrears owed to a public body which includes council tax and rent arrears, school meal debt, social fund loans, child maintenance loans, Universal Credit advances, DWP loans, benefit sanctions, court fines and overpaid tax credits.

Although the overall figure of this debt is unknown, in the second quarter of 2024, StepChange found that the average council tax arrears had increased by £204 to £2,075.⁴ Meanwhile the Money and Mental Health Institute in 2024 estimated that 1.1million adults across Great Britain were behind on the repayment of overpaid benefits or tax credits.⁵

In our soon to be launched Family Finances report (2025)⁶, 48% of the families we surveyed told us that their debt had increased in the past year. 64% told us that their household finances had worsened for their family and worryingly, 63% of families surveyed told us they struggled to pay their bills.

We see on a daily basis the impact that worrying about debt has on the families we support, both on their physical and mental health.

Writing-off public sector debt would involve working with local authorities, reimbursing them accordingly. It would involve local authorities writing-off Council Tax, social housing arrears and school meal debt- reimbursing councils accordingly.

There is also the scope to make this write-off more targeted, alleviating for specific groups such as those living in the most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD areas), and/or families with a child in receipt of free school meals or in receipt of Scottish Child Payment.

This bold move would help tackle the growing levels of child poverty in the country.

⁴ <https://www.stepchange.org/media-centre/press-releases/rise-in-council-tax-arrears-scotland.aspx>

⁵ <https://www.moneyandmentalhealth.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/In-The-Public-Interest.pdf>

⁶ Set to be published in February 2025, the published report can be made available to the forum.



- **Increase the Scottish Child Payment to £50 per week.**

The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** found that by increasing to £50 per week, per child, and continuing to increase it by inflation, it would lift around 15,000 children out of poverty and a further 25,000 children out of deep poverty by 2030/31. This would cost the Scottish Child Taxpayer an estimated £370million.⁷

Although the Scottish Child Payment cannot be relied on to be the only tool to tackle child poverty, there is no denying it is playing a significant role in combatting poverty for families across the country. The Scottish Government's own statistics shows that in 2024/25, the payment alone was projected to keep 60,000 children out of poverty.⁸

- **Mitigate the end of the two-child benefit cap in Scotland.**

Any potential Labour Scottish Government should honour the Scottish Government's planned mitigation of the two-child benefit cap whilst continuing to press the UK Government to finally end this cruel restriction.

CPAG Scotland estimates that 15,000 children would be lifted out of poverty in Scotland alone if the benefit cap was scrapped.⁹

We strongly urge Scottish Labour to support this move.

- **Commit to providing universal free school meals for all children and young people.**

It is well known that free school meals can improve a child and young person's health and wellbeing, improve their education outcomes, reduces stigma, reduces the impact of poverty and can improve a family's budget.

We were dismayed when the Scottish Government scrapped their plans for free school meals to be extended to P6/P7s.

In our soon to be published Family Finances Report (2025), 52% of the families we surveyed told us they struggled to pay for costs related to school, including school meals.

We urge any potential Labour Scottish Government to explore rolling out universal school meals to all children and young people both in primary and secondary schools. No child or young person should go to school hungry.

⁷ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-scotland-2024>

⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-poverty-cumulative-impact-assessment-update/pages/4/>

⁹ <https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/CPAG%20in%20Scotland%20-%20Programme%20for%20Government%202024-25.pdf>



Social Security

Families we support regularly tell us that accessing social security can significantly add to their debt. For those who receive Universal Credit, they must wait weeks before their initial payment. We know, that when families receive their payments in arrears, this can trap them into the vicious cycle of debt.

Families also told us that they wanted:

- Greater financial security – including an uplift in social security levels.
- A simpler process for accessing payments.
- End to long waits for their first payment.

We also would like to see the end of the punitive sanction system. We have always been clear that when a recipient is sanctioned, you effectively sanction a child. This runs contrary to the not only the rights of a child but in successive governments ambitions to tackle child poverty. **The system was designed to support them, not harm them.**

We also believe that the any potential Scottish Government should work with the third sector to increase awareness of both accessing and gaining advice to financial support. This could be **achieved by appointing Social Security Scotland Development Officers** to work with third sector organisations. These Officers would provide information and support through drop-in sessions, having someone dedicated to the organisation for any social security queries and more and could ultimately reduce the barriers to accessing advice and support than many of the families we support tell us they face.

Justice

As an organisation that routinely responds to incidents of anti-social behaviour by young people, we know that it is not just the police who can respond. Increasingly, we are seeing more and more detached youth-works being created in partnerships between the local authority, Police Scotland and the third sector such as our **ConnectED** service in East Dunbartonshire.

ConnectED sees a team of includem staff hit the streets of East Dunbartonshire to engage directly with young people in their communities. We identify potential hotspots of anti-social behaviour, helping to improve the skills and confidence for those who are at risk of engaging in anti-social behaviour.

We know that there are root causes for young people participating in anti-social behaviour – whether this be a direct result of boredom, their mental health or an impact of poverty. We are encouraged with the **Proposed Youth Work (Scotland) Bill** by Martin Whitfield MSP that would look to give every child and young person the right to youth work, this will play a part in reducing anti-social behaviour by children and young people, but we know more needs to be done.



Includem continues to support Children in Scotland's call for the introduction of a Hobby Guarantee in Scotland¹⁰ – ensuring children and young people have access to a free hobby based around the school day – regardless of their family income levels. With access to a new hobby, new peers and new opportunities, we know that we would see a decrease in the levels of anti-social behaviour being carried out by young people in Scotland.

A Labour Scottish Government should also look to ensure that the voices of young people are actively heard by Community Planning panels by having a youth rep voice. This would play a small part in getting young people engaged in their local communities and prevent them from getting involved in anti-social behaviour. Children and young people have also told us about the need for free, dry spaces where they could access free Wi-Fi and charging points for phones. These simple solutions would not only have a major impact on wellbeing but also create safe spaces that could potentially reduce anti-social behaviour.

We would also like to see a commitment by a Labour Scottish Government to reach children and young people who the government would not normally speak to. Children living in poverty, involved in the youth justice system, experiencing issues with mental health support or facing barriers in education who feel decisions are made about their lives and without their input. Not every child or young person is involved in the Scottish Youth Parliament or feels comfortable in sharing their voice in fear of “*nothing would happen anyway*” but their voice is just as important.

¹⁰ <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/2021-26-manifesto/>



Conclusion

Children, young people and families need urgent action and support if we want to end poverty in Scotland. We work to represent and amplify their forgotten voice.

Poverty in Scotland has been around for over 100 years. We need bold, creation action from both of Scotland's governments to combat it and to transform the lives of children, young people and families. We urgently require:

- Parity between the social care sector and other sectors.
- Enhanced support for the areas of highest deprivation.
- Radical change which removes the fear of getting it wrong.

If we don't act now, we risk another generation living and growing up in poverty and further escalation of the inequalities experienced by too many children, young people and families.

We would urge you to consider our ideas and our responses. We look forward to engaging with representatives over the coming months.

We would also welcome the opportunity to explore the future involvement of our Youth Inspire Group – our advisory body made up of present and former young people supported by includem.

If you have any follow up questions, please feel free to contact us at publicaffairs@includem.co.uk.



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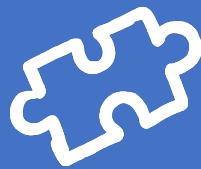
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Further Reading

Since 2020, includem have published the following:

- **Staying Connected: Assessing Digital Inclusion (2020):** <https://includem.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Staying-Connected-Assessing-digital-inclusion.pdf>
- **Poverty and the Impact of Coronavirus on Young People and Families (2020):** <https://includem.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Poverty-and-the-Impact-of-Coronavirus-on-Young-People-and-Families.pdf>
- **Living in Poverty: A Form of Permanent Lockdown (2021):** <https://includem.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Poverty-Report-FINAL.pdf>
- **Voices: Families Experiences of Poverty and Services (2021):** https://issuu.com/includem2000_/docs/voices-families-experiences-of-poverty-services-di
- **The School Experience of Young People: Pre and During Covid-19 (2021):** https://issuu.com/includem2000_/docs/the-school-experience-of-young-people-pre-and-duri
- **#GrowingUpGrieving – The National Childhood Bereavement Final Report (2022):** https://issuu.com/includem2000_/docs/ncbp_includem_22_v4
- **It Is Not A Choice! (2022):** https://issuu.com/includem2000_/docs/it_is_not_a_choice_designed_v1?fr=xKAE9_zU1NQ
- **Lack: Housing, Care & Isolation Report (2023):** <https://includem.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Lack-Housing-Report.pdf>
- **MRC Supports Across Scotland: Research:** https://issuu.com/includem2000_/docs/mrc_report_2024_180424
- **Coming Soon: Family Finances Research (2025)**



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