



Scottish
Women's
Budget
Group

OUR KEY PRIORITIES FOR THE UK GENERAL ELECTION

In the last five years, women have been disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 and cost-of-living crisis due to existing inequalities across all areas of life.¹ Women are more likely to be living in poverty, have lower levels of savings and wealth and are less able to increase paid work than men due to caring responsibilities.

¹ <https://www.swbg.org.uk/content/publications/SWBG-Cost-of-Living-report-proof-06.pdf>



In March 2024, the Scottish Women's Budget Group launched its third annual Women's Survey, which aims to find out what matters to women in Scotland. With the prospect of a General Election on the horizon we asked women what their priorities are for whoever forms the next UK Government.

Of the 1026 women who took the survey this year, 69% feel worse off compared to last year, with 51% of respondents having to use their savings to be able to manage increased costs. This, along with the challenges posed by public budgets and public spending, is eroding women's economic resilience.

Responses highlighted the need to invest in essential public services like housing, education, health and social care as these are not only essential for people's well-being, but also for creating a strong economy. Respondents recognised that, while many areas of public policy are devolved and delivered by the Scottish Government reserved policy areas are often intertwined, with spending decisions made at Westminster having implications for the Scottish Budget.

This briefing reflects women's responses and highlights the key issues for a future UK Government to tackle.



1. A CARING SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM FOR ALL

Women are more likely to rely on social security. This stems from women's economic inequality, which is rooted in the undervaluation of care work (paid and unpaid) across our economy. After 14 years of austerity, the UK welfare system is in serious need of reform to provide the safety net required when people need it most.

“ Maternity leave has caused us to struggle with high household costs ”

Our Women's Survey 2024 highlighted that Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP) is an area of key concern for women. SMP is paid for up to 39 weeks at 90% of the person's average weekly earnings (before tax) for the first 6 weeks, and £184.03 or 90% of the person's average weekly earnings (whichever is lower) for the next 33 weeks. This threshold is set well below the minimum wage², and is driving households into debt, eroding savings and causing stress for families.

Carers' Allowance was also highlighted as a problematic area which pushes women into poverty and contributes to women's inequality. An area of concern raised was that those of pensionable age do not qualify for this payment despite continuing to care long into retirement.

“ Continued help with energy costs as I live with a disability there are pieces of equipment I need to keep charged up and running. I can't not do this, so it's a constant cost. Also, I need to keep warm, so I have to keep my heating at a constant temperature all day and night, no matter what the cost ”

Other issues that women in the survey brought up were the low level of the state pension, and the need to compensate women born in the 1950s affected by the changes to the State Pension Age. The High-Income Child Benefit Charge is another hugely controversial policy that needs to be reviewed.

“ If Universal Credit recognised holiday clubs and breakfast club for childcare costs. It's very difficult to find childcare for children over 4 that is registered with the Care Inspectorate (CI) but without CI registration, UC will not help with childcare costs. It is so, so hard to budget for school holidays for working parents, especially single parents ”

Finally, in addition to the inadequacy of the social security system, women told us about the difficulties they experience when dealing with the Department of Work and Pensions, for example, how processes in place to rectify overpayments have caused harm and/or unnecessary stress, as recently highlighted by the National Audit Office³.

The next UK Government needs to:

- ▶ Enhance Statutory Maternity Pay.
- ▶ Increase carer's allowance, scrap the income levels related to this and extend it to those over pensionable age.
- ▶ Agree fair and fast compensation for all women born in the 1950s affected by the lack of notice regarding the State Pension age increases.
- ▶ Review and increase state pension.
- ▶ Review the High-Income Child Benefit Charge.
- ▶ As part of the End Child Poverty Coalition, SWBG also supports the end of the two-child limit policy and the benefit cap.

² Maternity pay and leave: Pay – GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

³ National Audit Office to investigate growing scandal over carer's allowance | Carers | The Guardian



2. INVESTMENT IN SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

“ I hope when you analyse this you are bearing in mind that issues like health and social care aren't a popularity contest – just because some people are unaffected by these and will not choose them as a high priority doesn't mean they should be portrayed as less important. The scale of human harm should determine priorities, not what individuals are personally invested in ”

Health, Education, Social Care and Childcare were regarded as key priorities for women, although most respondents recognised that all policy areas are important as they are intertwined. SWBG alongside the other 4 nations' budget groups advocate for greater investment in the care sector as essential social infrastructure.⁴ Our vision for social infrastructure in Scotland focuses on the transformation of the adult social care sector and delivering a childcare system that works for parents, particularly women. Investment in these sectors can yield economic and social benefits while contributing to a low carbon economy.

“ I believe improving childcare will in turn benefit mental health and the economy allowing more parents to work and spend ”

Investing in our public services was crucial for the majority of respondents, showing the extent to which women regard public services as a second safety net after the social security system.

“ Universal service that protect and provide for everyone education, health, housing, and social security are priorities for me. Anti-poverty is also a priority but would be an even bigger issue without quality universal services for everyone ”

“ Investing in education, health and housing will prevent longer term issues that cost more money to address. Local government needs to have more control of spending but also needs to be more efficient and be better at planning rather than just reacting to everything. Investment in transport or green travel would open opportunities to employment for a lot of people and make it easier for people to access leisure facilities, health appointments etc. Investment in social care will help to address the issue of bed blocking in hospitals and increase in community facilities will reduce the number of people who attend their GP or A&E out of loneliness rather than an actual health issue ”

While the management of public services are devolved to Scotland, additional public expenditure in England would have an impact through Barnett consequentials.

The future UK Government must:

- ▶ Use monetary and fiscal policy to support public investment.
- ▶ Fully fund a system of high quality universal free early education and childcare, addressing funding gaps and staffing challenges.
- ▶ Invest in a high-quality universal, free social care service which meets people's needs and invests in the wellbeing of the workforce by offering comprehensive training and higher wages.⁵



⁴ Towards a green and caring economy – briefing for a future Government – Women's Budget Group (wbg.org.uk)

⁵ <https://www.swbg.org.uk/content/publications/Towards-a-transformative-universal-adult-social-care-support-service-for-Scotland.pdf>

3. INVESTMENT IN PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE, CLIMATE CHANGE AND NET ZERO

Most women in our survey thought addressing climate change should be a priority and feared the cost of inaction in this area. Responses revealed that women support a transition to Net Zero and move towards more resilient communities that can withstand climate change. Yet, women emphasised that a Just Transition that protects those most vulnerable needs to be at the core of any agenda on Net Zero.

“ I am really worried about the cutting of funding of green initiatives and food security, as climate change is looming and measures aren't in place to protect the public, especially the most vulnerable ”

“ The policies of the Green New Deal are key. Systemic change is needed, a holistic plan that puts life at the core not acquisition of wealth for the few ”

Additionally, women shared their experiences of the ongoing impact of the cost-of-living crisis, particularly in relation to the increases in their utility bills.

“ Personally, ban on mid-contract price rises for utilities such as energy and broadband etc; more independent oversight of supermarket food pricing to prevent unnecessary price inflation and profiteering from this crisis; ban of 'early-exit fees' for mortgage and utility providers. More generally: more social tariffs (all utilities such as broadband, energy etc) and widening of eligibility for vulnerable households; ban on mid-contract price rises; more public investment in public spaces such as libraries, schools etc. and public services ”

“ Putting pressure on the energy companies, my standing charge is crazy, before I've turned a light on I've spent 72p, that's not right. I live alone, I don't have someone to help share the burden of my costs, my friends are all married have partners so their bills are halved and can afford holidays and going out. I thought going into my 30s with a good income was going to really help me save etc, I felt like I had more money in 2021 than I do now and I am on £10k more than I was then! ”

“ If we do not consider the impact of the energy transition and net zero on all communities we run the risk of being left with high cost, inefficient and unsustainable systems. Strategy and direction needs to come from governments and we are already lagging on where we need to be ”

Women also regarded housing and homelessness as a key area of concern due to the difficulties in accessing housing as a result of increasing prices in this area.

The future UK Government needs to move on from oil and gas and redesign an economy that works within planetary boundaries. It must:

- ▶ Build new energy efficient housing and commit to a comprehensive programme of retrofitting.
- ▶ Invest in provision of social housing.
- ▶ Invest in a programme of solutions to flooding.
- ▶ Nationalise energy distribution and review how the energy markets work to ensure more equitable charges.

4. TAXATION

Taxation is an important part of the puzzle if the next UK Government is to create the type of transformational change that the country needs. Investing in the care economy, improving our public services, investing in social housing, transitioning to Net Zero and creating a caring social security system all require investment. Taxation can generate part of the revenue needed to make this investment possible.

Yet, for taxes to be fair and work for women, they need to be progressive and move beyond taxing income.⁶

Some of the respondents to the Women's Survey 2024 had specific suggestions on how to address tax more fairly through a review of personal allowances and thresholds:

“ Raising the annual personal allowance ”

“ Increase the amount of money I can earn before UC start taking money off. Cost of living has gone up but what I can financially bring home is the same ”

“ Increase in state pension and increase limit of earnings for pension credit. We earn a few pounds more than limit and get no help. Tax allowance should be increased it has been at £12,570 for a good while again taking pensioners into the group who pay tax ”

Our Women's Survey 2024 also showed that there is support for windfall taxes and introducing caps on profits.

We ask the future UK Government to:

- ▶ Increase the Energy Profits Levy (EPL)
- ▶ Treat capital gains as income and tax it at the same rate.
- ▶ Apply national insurance to investment income, as proposed by Tax Justice UK⁷.
- ▶ Review the Personal Allowance for Income Tax.
- ▶ Consider the introduction of a wealth tax.⁸

⁶ [Spring Budget 2024: Taxation and Gender – Women's Budget Group \(wbg.org.uk\)](https://www.wbg.org.uk)

⁷ [Six wealth tax policies that could raise £50 billion – Tax Justice UK](https://www.taxjusticeuk.org)

⁸ [Why taxation of wealth is a feminist issue: A gendered analysis of wealth in Great Britain – Women's Budget Group \(wbg.org.uk\)](https://www.wbg.org.uk)

