1. Children in Scotland is the collective voice for children, young people and families in Scotland as well as the organisations and businesses that have a significant impact on children’s lives throughout the country. It is a membership organisation, comprised of more than 500 representatives from the voluntary, public and private sectors.

2. We aim to identify and promote the interests of children and their families, influencing the development of policy and services in order to ensure that they are of the best possible quality, capable of meeting the needs of children and young people living in Scotland.

3. We are glad to be able to provide evidence on the Social Security (Scotland) Bill as we see the Bill as a vital mechanism for improving the outcomes of children and young people across Scotland. Our response to the call for evidence on the Bill will focus on certain key questions to ensure that we are able to provide high quality evidence to the committee. Sections will be headed with the number of each question being answered.

Principles of the Bill.

4. The principles outlined in the Bill are a positive starting point for the Scottish social security system. We particularly welcome social security being framed as a human right, and the emphasis on respect for the dignity of individuals. This must, by extension include the rights and dignity of children whose families are seeking or in receipt of social security support, and young people seeking social security support themselves.

5. We are, however, concerned that at present the principles do not mention poverty or inequality. Tackling these issues is a key purpose of the Bill and should be at the heart of Scottish social security. We understand that tackling or alleviating poverty may be implicit within the Bill. However, this must be included within the principles of the Bill to give it prominence.

6. This is particularly important as the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill progresses; social security measures will be key to achieving the ambitious aims of this Bill. As members of the End Child Poverty Group, we are firmly of the view that these two pieces of legislation are inextricably linked and this must be noted by making reference to poverty, child poverty and inequality in the principles of the Social Security (Scotland) Bill.

7. We would also advocate for the principles in the Bill to commit explicitly to a co-production approach; co-production is vital for service improvement and so should be a key principle of the Bill. At present the principles commit to involvement of the ‘people of Scotland’ and we believe the commitment should be much more clearly linked to engagement with all those who interact with the social security system and commit to involving them within a co-design approach. This should include children and young people whose parents and families engage with it, to ensure that it is meeting their needs.
Charter
8. Children in Scotland supports the establishment of a charter in statute.
9. There are certain key measures that we would like to see within the charter, particularly if principles that relate to poverty and inequality are to be included. The Bill identifies that the charter will set out what is expected of Scottish Ministers, this should include a commitment to the development of evidence-based social security policy aimed at reducing poverty and narrowing inequality along with explanations of how this will be pursued.
10. Where the charter relates to the co-design approach we would advocate for the explicit reference to how engagement with children and young people will be supported. This must make reference to how this will be embedded at all stages to ensure that it is meaningful and also identify how it will utilise skilled practitioners to support the work.
11. The charter should also make reference to the rights of the child and how these rights will be upheld within the social security system. This will in part be upheld by the meaningful and consistent engagement identified above.
12. Our work consistently highlights the importance of good relationships to promote engagement with services. The charter for the social security system should clearly identify how it will promote positive relationships between claimants and staff, and this should include consistency of staff members where possible, positive, welcoming structures, such as child-friendly establishments, and flexibility to support those families whose children have additional support needs, for example.
13. The charter should relate to all those involved in social security, both those accessing and delivering. This can be used to reflect the ‘two-way dialogue’ that is noted on P13 of the policy memorandum.

Rules
14. It is important that the rules provide clarity over how social security will be administered and how any changes will be made. These should be developed in partnership with those who have lived experience of claiming social security to ensure that processes developed work for those who need them, and remove where possible the barriers and problems inherent with the current system. These rules must also be made accessible, to support those who have additional support needs to engage with the system.
15. We believe the Scottish Government has an important role to play to ensure that information about these rules is conveyed in accessible formats to the Scottish public. This should include a commitment to educating children and young people about the social security system and their rights within it. We know from prior work that children and young people feel they learn only about careers in schools and want to learn about other skills and aspects of living.

“[we are] taught about careers but not actually about how to live.” (Children in Scotland School Nurse Review)

Current Benefits
16. The Scottish Government should clearly outline how and when the measures identified will be implemented through a Delivery Plan. This should be linked where relevant with the delivery plans in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill.

**Short Term Assistance**

17. Children in Scotland feel that assistance is required for those challenging a decision to stop or reduce a benefit to ensure that income remains stable and there is no reduction in living standards over this time. This is particularly important for ensuring that decisions such as this do not impact on the rights and outcomes of children and young people who have no control over them.

18. Ensuring that assistance is available to people when claims are being made will support the principles of dignity that the system looks to uphold and embed the rights of those who engage with the system. In the longer term we expect this to promote far more positive engagement than the punitive model currently applied by the DWP.

**Top Up Powers**

19. We are supportive of the inclusion in the Bill of the power to ‘top up’ reserved benefits. We believe these should be used where there is clear evidence that to do so would have a significant impact on reducing poverty and inequalities. We support the recommendations put forward by the #giveme5 campaign, involving the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), Poverty Alliance and others, that the Scottish Government utilise the power to ‘top-up’ existing benefits and increase Child Benefit by £5 per week. Independent analysis conducted by CPAG has suggested that this could have a significant impact on reducing inequalities, and bring down rates of child poverty by up to 14% compared to current levels. This could set Scotland on a different trajectory from the rest of the UK, where levels of child poverty are set to rise dramatically in the coming years.

20. This will give the Scottish Government added confidence that the delivery of a Child Benefit top up would support the aims and ambitions of their Child Poverty Bill to eradicate child poverty in Scotland.

21. The Social Security (Scotland) Bill should also include commitments on the creation of new benefits. Children in Scotland would advocate for wide engagement with civil society, academia and users of the social security system about the creation of new benefits going forward. This will support the Scottish Government to create an evidence-based social security system that upholds human rights, reduces poverty and ultimately allows children, young people and their families to flourish.

**Carers Allowance**

22. Children in Scotland strongly supports the increase in Carers Allowance in line with Job Seekers Allowance for those aged 25 and over. Evidence has shown that children and young people with caring responsibilities often struggle to afford basics like lunch and an increase in this allowance would go some distance to tackling these issues.
“Sometimes because I leave myself with no money, at times I have no food for my lunch.” (Costly Youth: The Impact of Caring on Young People in Scotland, Scottish Youth Parliament, 2014)

The increase should also include young carers to ensure that there is not a two-tier system based on age.

**Discretionary Housing Payments**

23. The current mechanism for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) in Scotland should not continue in its present form and alternative measures should be considered.

24. The discretionary nature of the fund and the need to re-apply can cause stress for applicants due to instability of income. This has to be removed to eliminate the psychosocial impacts of stress and also to give far more stability in terms of material income.

25. There are also issues with the length of time an award can be made for and the lack of willingness to review the needs of a claimant at the end of an award. Where someone requires DHP their needs are likely not being met by their current level of social security provision and more must be done to re-evaluate need consistently across the social security system.

26. The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has identified that whether people receive a payment or not can depend on Local Authority area. There has to be more consistency in the administration of DHPs to ensure families understand eligibility criteria and the conditions for qualification.

27. The wording of the Bill also appears to suggest at present that Local Authorities can decide whether to have a scheme for DHPs. This must be changed to ensure equality of access across the country. Local Authorities must be given guidance on this and also adequately resourced to make payments.

Young people have also identified through our Beyond4Walls project that they do not know about DHPs, identifying that more needs to be done to ensure young people understand when and how they can access these.

“DHP – that’s not widely advertised whatsoever, I mean why no, do they no want people to know about it?” (Beyond4Walls)

28. The Scottish Government should also explore whether it can mitigate the restrictions on DHPs to 18-21 year olds through the new top up powers under the Social Security (Scotland) Bill. At present under universal credit young people are unfairly discriminated against and this must be altered to give a just and ethical social security system.