



# WOMEN'S SURVEY 2026

## NEW PARLIAMENT: WOMEN'S PRIORITIES BRIEFING

### SUMMARY

**On 25th February 2026, the Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) launched its fifth annual Women's Survey. The survey plays a vital role in documenting the lived experiences of women in Scotland, particularly how public policy and budgets intersect with and potentially reinforce existing inequalities.**

The survey was open for just over a month and gathered 1,025 responses from women across Scotland's 32 local authorities.

This briefing focuses on women's priorities in the context of the 2026 Holyrood election. Across all respondents, health is ranked as the most important devolved policy area to their lives, alongside education and social care. However, when asked to rank a set of policy areas in order of priority for reducing inequality for women in Scotland, affordable childcare (both early years and school-age provision) was identified as the top priority.

The findings are disaggregated by groups of respondents using an intersectional approach. The groups include carers, disabled women, lone parents, single-adult households, retired women, women with an income under £20,000, women living in rural areas, women from Black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, women under 35, and LGBTQ+ women.

Further details on the survey's methodology and respondent demographics can be found at the end of the report.



# FINDINGS

## How important are key devolved policy areas to the women who took the survey?

Across all 861 respondents who answered this question, the five devolved policy areas rated as most important to them were:

- ▶ Health
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Social care
- ▶ Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty
- ▶ Social services (i.e. child and adult protection)

Given the differing circumstances and levels of inequality experienced by different groups of women, as well as the impact of caring responsibilities, priorities vary across groups of respondents. However, two key points are worth highlighting before examining each group's preferences in detail.

Firstly, **all groups rate health as the most important devolved policy area.**

Secondly, while there is variation in what different groups prioritise, **responses are concentrated within a relatively narrow set of ten policy areas** out of the 19 options provided. These are:

- ▶ Health
- ▶ Education
- ▶ Social care
- ▶ Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty
- ▶ Social services (i.e. child and adult protection)
- ▶ Housing
- ▶ Certain aspects of transport policy, such as road, ferry, inland waterway and railway networks in Scotland; national concessionary travel schemes; and the provision of network traffic and travel information services
- ▶ Policing
- ▶ Fire services
- ▶ Early learning and childcare

The following table illustrates how respondents rated the importance of different policy areas devolved to the Scottish Parliament:

No.	Carers	Disabled women	Lone Parent	Single household	Women in rural areas	Retired women	Black Minority Ethnic	Women under 35	LGBTQ+
1	Health	Health	Health	Health	Health	Health	Health	Health	Health
2	Education	Social care	Education	Social care	Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty	Social care	Social care	Education	Social care
3	Social care	Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty	Housing	Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty	Social care	Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty	Housing	Social services i.e. child and adult protection	Social services i.e. child and adult protection
4	Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty	Social services i.e. child and adult protection	Social services i.e. child and adult protection	Certain aspects of transport policy, such as road, ferry, inland waterway and railway networks in Scotland; national concessionary travel schemes, and the provision of network traffic and travel information services.	Education	Policing	Social services i.e. child and adult protection	Early Learning and Childcare	Housing
5	Social services i.e. child and adult protection	Housing	Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty	Social services i.e. child and adult protection	Certain aspects of transport policy, such as road, ferry, inland waterway and railway networks in Scotland; national concessionary travel schemes, and the provision of network traffic and travel information services.	Fire services	Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty	Housing	Education

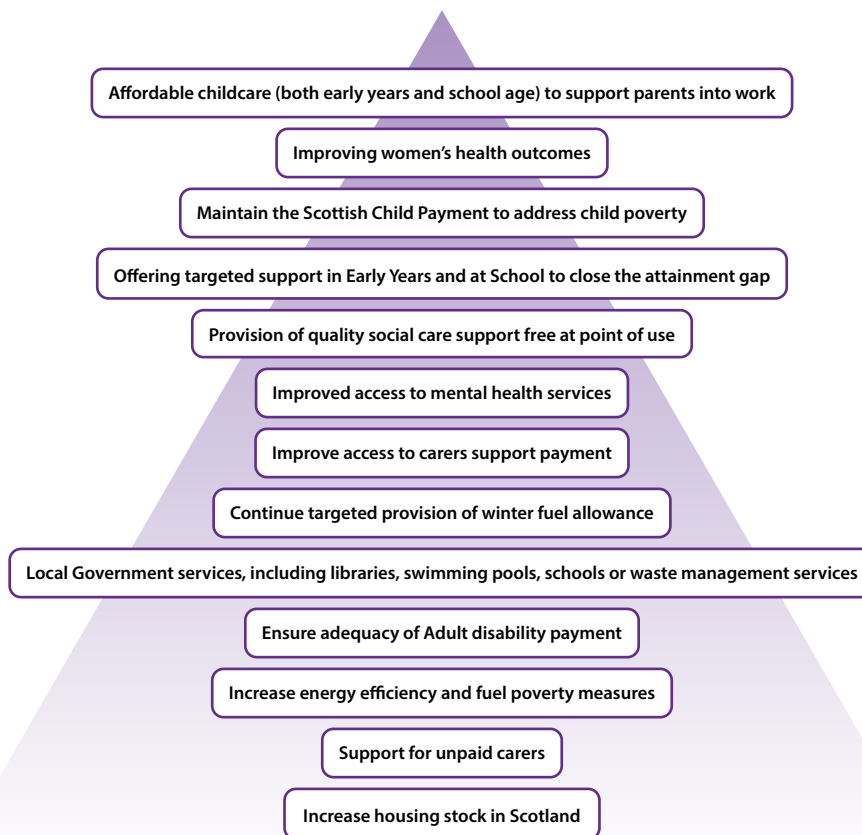
This information is crucial for decision-makers to consider in policy development and budget decision-making. For example, when developing plans for a just transition in Scotland, it is important to take into account the needs and experiences of women living in rural areas, who rank energy efficiency measures, action to tackle fuel poverty, and transport policy more highly than other groups.

Similarly, disabled women rank social care as their second most important devolved policy area, which may reflect their experiences of, and demand for, these

services. There is also likely overlap between this group and LGBTQ+ women, BME women, and women in single-adult households, who are more likely to report having a disability in this survey.

### How did respondents rank selected policy areas to reduce inequality for women in Scotland?

Across all 852 women who responded to this question, **affordable childcare was ranked as their top priority in tackling women's inequality.**



In some cases, this response was shaped by respondents' direct experiences of childcare:

*“Childcare is the biggest obstacle for me to return to full-time work, directly affecting my economic independence. Child allowances and winter subsidies are the key factors that enable me and my daughter to survive each month. These policies really can make a difference,” respondent aged 26-35.*

In other responses, there was a broader recognition that caring responsibilities, alongside a lack of adequate

social infrastructure, constrain women's economic opportunities and independence:

*“Given mothers are typically the default caregiver. Better access to high quality and affordable childcare can support them to find freedom from the household, whatever that means to them. Equally, support around caregiving more generally will likely support women. Anything that helps people out of poverty is likely to support more vulnerable women who might be financially dependent on partners or are sacrificing their own wellbeing to help their children,” respondent aged 36-45.*

***“Gender equality and child poverty are impacted by women’s ability to access fair, quality work which is commensurate with their skills, experience and aspirations. Because of women’s caring commitments this work often needs to be part-time and/or flexible. Better childcare provision (from an earlier age, viewed as an investment in infrastructure), wider availability if fair, flexible work at all skills levels and provision of employability support to access those roles can work together to improve workplace equality, women’s access to fair work and women’s economic and social outcomes as well as the wellbeing of their children,” respondent aged 46-55.***

Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) was closely followed by improving women’s health outcomes, maintaining the Scottish Child Payment as a key measure to address child poverty, offering targeted support in Early Years and at School to close the attainment gap and the provision of quality social care support free at point of use.

Although “increasing housing stock in Scotland” ranked lowest, qualitative evidence from the survey indicates that many women highlighted the need for affordable housing. This discrepancy may reflect a lack of clarity in how the issue was framed in the survey.

Yet, as with the previous question, an intersectional analysis of responses shows slight variation in what should be prioritised to tackle women’s inequality.

Number	Carers	Disabled women	Lone Parent	Single household	Women in rural areas	Retired women	Women with household income under £20k	Black Minority Ethnic	Women under 35	LGBTQ+
1	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work	Improving women’s health outcomes	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work	Improving women’s health outcomes	Improving women’s health outcomes	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work
2	Improving women’s health outcomes	Ensure adequacy of Adult disability payment	Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work	Provision of quality social care support free at point of use	Ensure adequacy of Adult disability payment	Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty	Improving women’s health outcomes	Improving women’s health outcomes
3	Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty	Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work	Improving women’s health outcomes	Provision of quality social care support free at point of use	Offering targeted support in Early Years and at School to close the attainment gap	Continue targeted provision of winter fuel allowance	Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty	Improving women’s health outcomes	Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty	Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty
4	Offering targeted support in Early Years and at School to close the attainment gap	Provision of quality social care support free at point of use	Offering targeted support in Early Years and at School to close the attainment gap	Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty	Provision of quality social care support free at point of use	Improving women’s health outcomes	Continue targeted provision of winter fuel allowance	Offering targeted support in Early Years and at School to close the attainment gap	Offering targeted support in Early Years and at School to close the attainment gap	Improved access to mental health services
5	Provision of quality social care support free at point of use	Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty	Improved access to mental health services	Continue targeted provision of winter fuel allowance	Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty	Offering targeted support in Early Years and at School to close the attainment gap	Improving women’s health outcomes	Improve access to carers support payment	Improved access to mental health services	Provision of quality social care support free at point of use

Disabled women, women in single-adult households and women living in rural areas ranked improving health outcomes for women as the most important measure to address gender inequality. These responses may be shaped by the respondents' own experiences of disability or health conditions.

***"My early 20s were a right-off due to poor diagnosis and treatment for women's health, I fear I will face these issues again. Women's health just isn't understood or respected," respondent aged 36-45.***

For lone parents and BME women, social security measures (such as maintaining the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty) were ranked as the second most important policy area, highlighting the importance of the social security system in supporting women's financial security.

***"The Scottish Child payment was a HUGE help. It's a shame it doesn't continue until you child leaves education but I understand it's expensive. The cost of food, school uniforms, clothes in general are so expensive. The Scottish Child payment enabled me to provide without having to sacrifice any of my own meals and to make sure my son was properly clothed, especially in winter," respondent aged 46-55.***

In relation to carers, while this group is commonly understood to include those providing unpaid care to disabled adults or older relatives, this survey also captures those providing unpaid care to children. This may help explain why the provision of social care support free at the point of use ranked fifth, and why improving access to the Carers Support Payment did not appear among the top five priorities for tackling women's inequality. However, qualitative evidence provides further insight into this group's needs:

***"Increasing support for unpaid carers who provide a huge saving to the government is critical. Most unpaid carers are women and there has been an increase in the number of hours of unpaid care provided. This prevents women from taking on paid roles and affects mental and physical health which in turn then increases the burden on the NHS. The Scottish child payment is needed because there are still too many children living in poverty in Scotland," respondent aged 46-55.***

## What do these findings mean for newly elected MSPs?

The survey highlights that health, education, and social infrastructure (including childcare and adult social care) are central to women's priorities and to advancing women's equality. The issue of childcare has already gained significant momentum, with most parties broadly agreeing on the need to improve and expand the system.

Alongside this, given that health accounts for a substantial proportion of the Scottish budget, it is important that the next Parliament considers how this investment can more effectively meet women's needs and address persistent inequalities, and how possible reforms work to tackle inequality.

Finally, one of the key frustrations of the previous Parliament was the lack of progress on social care reform, despite its consistent identification as a priority issue for women. This remains a critical area for action in the new parliamentary term.



## We are calling on MSPs to:

- ▶ Invest in a social care support system that meets the needs of disabled people and enables choices – including an end to non-residential social care charges and tackling unmet need;
- ▶ Scrutinise health spending, particularly the sufficiency of funding underpinning Scotland's Women's Health Plan Phase Two (2026–2029), and commit additional investment where necessary through realigning current expenditure or securing new funding;
- ▶ Improve the current ELC offer, particularly by strengthening provision for eligible two-year-olds, protecting and enhancing local authority capacity to deliver childcare, and ensuring a robust and transparent funding formula to prevent further erosion of provision;
- ▶ Take further action to ensure ELC better supports low-income families:
  - link the implementation of ELC to the delivery of child poverty targets, for example by making the offer more generous for the six priority family groups;
  - strengthen the quality of care;
- ▶ Expand the childcare offer for pre-school and school-aged children, ensuring it is accessible and flexible enough to meet parents' diverse working patterns;
- ▶ Ensure that all work on a Just Transition takes an intersectional approach, recognising the needs of different groups of women, particularly those living in rural areas, as well as disabled and low-income women.

**Across all areas of government, implement gender budgeting approaches within the decision-making process to ensure policy works towards promoting women's equality.**

## ABOUT US

The Scottish Women's Budget Group (SWBG) is a charity that promotes women's equality. We do this by helping people understand how budgets and economic policy can tackle inequality. SWBG brings together a wide range of women from across Scotland who have an interest in women's equality and want to achieve better gender equality in our society. We have focused on encouraging active gender analysis in the Scottish Budget process since 2000.

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## METHODOLOGY

This year's survey looked at themes of women's financial wellbeing, caring responsibilities, and views on engagement with the Scottish Budget process, as well as key questions ahead of the Scottish Parliament (Holyrood) elections.

The first of these questions asked respondents how important the following devolved areas were to them:

- ▶ **Certain aspects of energy, such as energy efficiency measures and actions to tackle fuel poverty**
- ▶ **Certain aspects of tax, such as setting income tax rates**
- ▶ **Certain aspects of transport policy, such as road, ferry, inland waterway and railway networks in Scotland; national concessionary travel schemes; and the provision of network traffic and travel information services**
- ▶ **Early learning and childcare**
- ▶ **Economic development, such as encouraging entrepreneurship or supporting key economic sectors**
- ▶ **Education**
- ▶ **Environmental policy, such as water, waste management, or biodiversity**
- ▶ **Farming and fisheries support**
- ▶ **Fire services**
- ▶ **Freedom of information**
- ▶ **Health**
- ▶ **Housing**
- ▶ **Justice (i.e. courts)**
- ▶ **Local government**
- ▶ **Policing**
- ▶ **Social care**
- ▶ **Social services (i.e. child and adult protection)**
- ▶ **Sport and the arts**
- ▶ **Tourism**

Women rated each area on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 indicated "not at all important" and 100 indicated "very important."

The second question asked respondents to rank a set of policy areas in order of priority for reducing inequality for women. The policy areas were determined based on SWBG's research and analysis on women's equality.

The options provided were:

- ▶ **Affordable childcare (both early years and school age) to support parents into work**
- ▶ **Improving women's health outcomes**
- ▶ **Maintain the Scottish Child Payment to address child poverty**
- ▶ **Offering targeted support in Early Years and at School to close the attainment gap**
- ▶ **Provision of quality social care support free at point of use**
- ▶ **Improved access to mental health services**
- ▶ **Improve access to carers support payment**
- ▶ **Continue targeted provision of winter fuel allowance**
- ▶ **Local Government services, including libraries, swimming pools, schools or waste management services**
- ▶ **Ensure adequacy of adult disability payment**
- ▶ **Increase energy efficiency and fuel poverty measures**
- ▶ **Support for unpaid carers**
- ▶ **Increase housing stock in Scotland**

## DEMOGRAPHICS

### Type of area

**50%**

lived in an urban area (built up area with a population of over 10,000)

**29%**

lived in a small town

**21%**

lived in a rural area



### Household type

**37%**

two adult household

**19%**

two adult household with children (under 18)



**8%**

three or more adult household (i.e. flat-share, living with non-dependent family members or with dependent children over 18)

**5%**

single adult household with children (under 18)

**24%**

single adult household without children

**7%**

other

### Age



**2%**  
were 18-25



**12%**  
were 26-35



**17%**  
were 36-45



**18%**  
were 46-55



**26%**  
were 56-65



**22%**  
were 66-75



**3%**

were 76 and older

**19%**  
of respondents' household income is lower than £20,000 per year



### Disability

**28%**

of respondents have a disability



### Ethnicity

**57%**  
White Scottish

**26%**  
White British

**2%**  
English

**3%**  
Women from black and minority ethnic communities\*

**1%**  
Irish

**1%**  
Eastern European

**6%**  
Any other white background

**2%**  
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

**1%**  
I do not wish to disclose my ethnic origin



### Sexual Orientation

**83%**  
heterosexual/straight

**11%**  
LGBTQ+

**6%**  
Prefer not to say



\* This group is made up of respondents identifying with the following ethnicities: Indian, Indian Scottish or Indian British; Pakistani, Pakistani Scottish or Pakistani British; Bangladeshi, Bangladeshi Scottish or Bangladeshi British; Chinese, Chinese Scottish or British Chinese; other Asian background; Caribbean, Caribbean Scottish or Caribbean British; African, African Scottish or African British; Black, Black Scottish or Black British; other Black background; and Arab, Arab Scottish or Arab British.