



# **Stepping Stones for Families**

**Sustaining Positive Change**

## **Stepping Stones for Families**

**Response to Scottish Government Consultation:  
Early years Assistance, Best Start Guidance**



## **“Early Assistance – Best Start Grant Regulations”**

### **Stepping Stones for Families Response to Scottish Government Consultation**

Stepping Stones for Families welcomes the opportunity to contribute our views and perspectives to the Scottish Government’s consultation on the draft regulations for Early Years Assistance, Best Start Grant.

[For 30 years](#), Stepping Stones for Families has worked alongside children, young people and families in their own communities, in both rural and urban settings; to give them support, opportunities and a voice in tackling the effects of poverty and disadvantage in their lives.

In compiling our response, SSfF has engaged and consulted with each of our [community based projects/services](#) including SSfF Carrick Money Advice Service, South Ayrshire.

### **Over-arching Statement**

Stepping Stones for Families welcomes the introduction of the new Best Start Grant across Scotland. As an organisation we believe the increase in value of the award and the phasing of one-off awards at key transition stages in a child’s life will support children to access the basic necessities, which some parents/carers may struggle financially to obtain.

We understand that the Best Start Grant is a series of one off grant awards that seek to alleviate the impact of poverty upon children. It is from this perspective that we have raised concerns about the exclusion of some very young children and babies from the benefits of a Best Start Grant award.

We are [committed to ensuring that all children have the very best start in life](#), and for many of the families we work alongside, life can be exceptionally challenging.

We believe that all children should have an enjoyable life, in a healthy and safe environment where they are respected and supported to [achieve their aspirations](#).

As an organisation we believe in and promote a children’s rights based approach in all that we do; not just within our services but also externally with our partners, funders and communities. We would encourage those reviewing this response to regard our views from this perspective.

### **Q1. We have proposed that applicants must be habitually resident in Scotland to qualify. Do you agree with this approach?**

Stepping Stones for Families (SSfF) understands that “habitual residency” is the approach most commonly applied, and in principle we would to some extent agree with this approach.

Please see our over-arching statement, and our concerns outlined in answer to Question 7 for further comment.

**Q2. There are two alternative responsibility tests set out in the consultation:**

- 1. Receipt of Child Benefit and, where relevant, a care order, or**
- 2. A test based on receipt of either Universal Credit or Child Tax Credit, or Child Benefit.**

**Which is your preferred test, test 1 or test 2?**

No Comment.

**Q.3. We have proposed that qualification by Universal Credit should be an award of more than £0 in the month or the month in which the application is made. Do you agree with this approach?**

Yes.

SSfF also welcomes recognition within the regulations that incomes can fluctuate; and that decisions on Best Start Grant will be based on the month pre-ceding an application. We also welcome the extended application window available to families/carers.

SSfF would suggest that information targeting parents includes a statement that application can be made during the application timescale if and when their family income/circumstances changes, e.g. a lowering of family income to within the Best Start Grant income threshold.

**Q.4. We have proposed that in cases where the parent is under the age of 16, or is 18 or 19 and the grandparent (or another carer) is still in receipt of tax credit or Universal Credit because the parent is in training or non-advanced education, the grandparent or carer will be the eligible person. Do you agree with this approach?**

Yes. However SSfF would advocate that the young person should be included in all decisions affecting them and their children.

SSfF would also point out in this section of our response, that the regulations are not specific or clear in relation to the concepts and practice of implicit versus explicit consent.

In consultation with SSfF Carrick Money Advice Service, the issue of explicit consent requirements introduced/enforced across the UK's welfare reform agenda, has created an additional burden, additional delay and significant barriers (by imposing a harsher environment) for some individuals, who through circumstance find that they are unable to self-advocate.

In our experience, we have found that some of the people we work alongside find themselves literally incapable of communicating directly with any representative of the Department of Work and Pensions, or HMRC Tax Credits, as a direct consequence of multiple factors which may include: negative experiences of the DWP; fear and acute anxiety; poor mental health; emotional and physical exhaustion; emotional distress; low self-esteem.

SSfF would welcome clarity about implicit and explicit consent within the Best Start Grant regulations.

**Q.5. Do you think that the draft regulations (Annex A) are likely to meet the policy intent set out in this document?**

SSfF welcomes the Best Start Grant and considers that the regulations will contribute to improving the wellbeing and life chances of some children. Please see our comments in answer to Question 7.

*"I believe the new BSG will be a positive move for most of the parents/carers that can access it as it will support them financially through key stages in a child's life."* SSfF Manager

*"Parents don't have to take up a nursery place to be awarded this...this is a good move as this will help parents that may choose to use other childcare options such as child-minders or grandparents, and the same again for starting school, this also allows parents that choose to home school their child the option to access the grant."* SSfF Manager

*"It will reduce the stress and anxiety that parents/carers are faced with at these times, it will free up what other household income they have to purchase other everyday essentials."* SSfF Manager

**Q.6. Can you identify any potential unintended consequences of the regulations?**

Parents will benefit from the support offered by health visitors and midwives in relation to the Maternity and New Baby Payment; it is generally accepted that children born in Scotland will have some contact with maternity services.

The majority of children in Scotland also attend primary school, where uptake of the Best Start Grant can be supported and encouraged. However not all children have contact with nurseries or early years services; further consideration may be required to ensure uptake of the grant at this key stage in a child's life, particularly as children do not have to attend a nursery to be eligible for the Best Start Grant Award.

**Discrimination and inequality**

Please refer to our over-arching statement and comments in answer to Question 7, alongside the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child: Article 2; Article 6; Article 7; Article 26; Article 28 (UNICEF, 1990)

**Q.7. Can you identify any gaps in the regulations?**

Yes.

The Best Start Grant regulations do not provide clarity on exclusions. SSfF would argue that the Scottish Government recognises and states within the regulations which groups of babies and very young children (especially those groups experiencing poverty, low family income, and/or destitution) are excluded from having equal access to the benefits of receiving a Best Start Grant award (or equivalent) and why; e.g. due to their "status".

SSfF proposes that the Scottish Government seeks to gather evidence about the numbers and life circumstances/experiences of children living in families seeking asylum and who reside in Scotland. The aim being to ensure that **all** children in Scotland have the very best start in life, and to support activities associated with the Best Start Grant; Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 (Scottish Parliament 2017); and the Scottish Government's proposed Connected Scotland: Tackling Social Isolation and Loneliness Strategy (Scottish Government, 2018).

SSfF understands that matters related to immigration are controlled by the UK Home Office, that immigration is not a devolved matter. However, the Best Start Grant is a grant **for children** and offered by the Scottish Government to alleviate the impact of poverty on their lives.

SSfF would also be keen to establish if children who live within families who are seeking asylum have been included and consulted by the Scottish Government in relation to the Best Start Grant, and were given equal opportunities to have their views heard.

**Q.8. (a). We have proposed that requests for a Best Start Grant re-determination should be made within 31 calendar days of receipt of notification of the original determination. Do you think that this is an acceptable time period?**

Generally, 31 calendar days would be considered sufficient, as the Best Start Grant is means tested.

SSfF welcomes provision in the regulations that requests for re-determination can be submitted and accepted out-with the 31 calendar day timescale, up to 12 months.

SSfF would propose that the regulations provide for delays a parent/child may encounter in accessing support (independent advocacy, money advice services) to submit a re-determination request.

Please also refer to our comments in answer to Question 5, as they relate to explicit and implicit consent.

**Q.8. (b). We have proposed that a Best Start Grant re-determination should be processed within 15 working days of receipt of a request. Do you think that is an acceptable time period?**

Yes.

**Q.9. (a). Are you aware of any impacts we have not identified?**

Yes.

### **Mandatory Consideration**

SSfF understands and welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring the new social security agency will be founded and operated upon principles of dignity and respect. SSfF would highlight that there is potential for a "play on words" interpretation of the draft regulations, that the mandatory reconsideration practice is simply being re-named as "re-determination".

At this time it was challenging to see any difference in practice, despite assurances that a re-determination will seek to re-assess, rather than judge "right or wrong" in relation to applications for the Best Start Grant, particularly as any re-determination will also be undertaken by a member of staff from within the same agency.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the impact of this interpretation, undermines the Government's commitment to dignity and respect.

**Q.9. (b). Are you aware of any evidence relevant to the Best Start Grant policy and Gender Reassignment and/or Sexual Orientation?**

No.

**Q.10. Are you aware of any impacts on children's rights and wellbeing which are not identified here?**

Yes.

Please see our comments in answer to Question 7.

**END.**

**References**

Scottish Government, (2018) "*Early Years Assistance, Consultation on Best Start Grant Regulations*" [Online] Available at URL <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/03/2016> (Accessed, April 2018)

Scottish Parliament (2017), "*Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017*", [Online] Available at URL <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2017/6/notes/contents> (Accessed, June 2018)

UNICEF, (1990) "*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*" [Online] Available at URL <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/> (Accessed, May 2018)



## RESPONDENT INFORMATION FORM

**Please Note** this form **must** be completed and returned with your response.

Are you responding as an individual or an organisation?

- ☐ Individual  
☒ Organisation

Full name or organisation's name

Stepping Stones for Families		Phone number
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Studio 3003a, Mile End Mill 12 Seedhill Road, PAISLEY	PA1 1JS	Postcode
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The option 'Publish response only (without name)' is available for individual respondents only. If this option is selected, the organisation name will still be published.

If you choose the option 'Do not publish response', your organisation name may still be listed as having responded to the consultation in, for example, the analysis report.

We will share your response internally with other Scottish Government policy teams who may be addressing the issues you discuss. They may wish to contact you again in the future, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for Scottish Government to contact you again in relation to this consultation exercise?

- ☒ Yes  
☐ No

