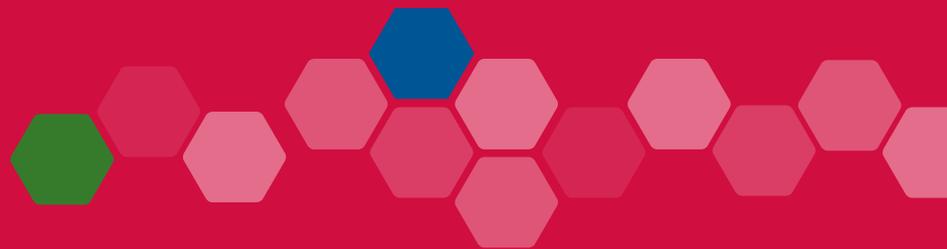




# Interim Evaluation of Best Start Grant: Annex B: Qualitative Research



**EQUALITY AND WELFARE**

# **Interim Evaluation of Best Start Grant: Annex A: Commissioned Qualitative Research**

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

The Scottish Government commissioned ScotCen Social Research in December 2019 to conduct qualitative research to inform the interim evaluation of the Best Start Grant (BSG) (excluding Best Start Foods), which will provide evidence on the early operation and impact of the BSG as well as to suggest improvements to its future function. The research sought to understand the experience of families who had received the BSG in the first 18 months of the benefit. The research explored recipient experiences of the application process, use of the grant, impact of the grant and respondent views on how the BSG could be improved in the future. BSG recipients were recruited to participate in the research in collaboration with national and local organisations and groups, including those which support specific groups of parents and carers including fathers, kinship carers, single parents, and families where parents and/or children live with disabilities. Thirty-six BSG recipients were interviewed between March and July 2020 for the evaluation. Respondents included a wide range of parents and carers in terms of age, household composition, geographical area and employment status.

## Applying for the Best Start Grant

- Respondents became aware of the BSG in a range of ways, most commonly through word of mouth. Health and social care staff, parental support organisations, money advice teams and social media were all cited as ways in which respondents heard about the grant.
- Respondents applied for a BSG in order to help with additional expenses associated with having a baby, or their child attending nursery or school with the concomitant financial implications. There were respondents who said they would have struggled to meet these expenses without the grant.
- In general, respondents applied when they heard about the payment, or applied as soon as they were eligible. A few respondents had to wait until their child reached a certain age to apply.
- Overall, respondents said that the application process was straightforward which was helped by: clear and easy to understand wording and format; a variety of application formats (online, paper, telephone); option for data to be used from other applications (e.g. Baby Box); text and letter confirmations that the application had been received and awarded; payments being made directly into respondents' bank accounts, and helpful call handlers if advice was needed.
- The most common negative factor reported by respondents was having to wait longer (for example, up to 5-8 weeks) than advertised to receive the grant. Respondents were also not always sure if they were eligible for the BSG.

## Use of the Best Start Grant

- Respondents generally had specific plans for the grant and used the money as they had intended. Those who did not use the grant in this way cited the extended length of time taken to receive the payment, or receiving these items by other means, as the reasons for this. There were respondents who spent the payment as soon as it arrived, whereas others bought items over time, or saved some of the payment to buy specific items at a later date.
- It was common for multiple items to be bought with the payments. Items bought were often essential items needed at these specific transitional stages, for example, cots, prams, nursery or school uniforms.
- In addition to essential items, respondents used the BSG for social and educational activities for children and the whole family, for example, outings during school holidays. A small number of respondents said that the grant payment had been used to pay bills and household expenses during times of financial strain.
- Respondents who received more than one of the BSG payments reported spending the grant in similar ways to those who only received one. Purchases relevant to the transitions of the age group were again the most commonly reported uses of the grant, with remaining funds going towards social and educational activities.
- With each of the BSG payments, parents and carers tended to spend the money in similar ways regardless of different family characteristics.

## Impact of the Best Start Grant

- The consensus was that the BSG had a very positive impact on the household finances of respondents. It was said that the grant prevented respondents from going into debt or having to cut down on other essential household spending, such as for food and bills. The grant enabled respondents to buy what they needed at key transitional stages of their children's life, and some claimants were also able to buy items for older children or to organise social and educational activities for the family.
- BSG was also thought to have a positive impact on the health and well-being of respondents. Parents and carers said that the grant reduced financial stress and enabled them to feel prepared for key transitional stages in their child's life. Respondents expressed feelings of pride and increased self-esteem in being able to provide for their child rather than being dependent on others, and also as they could buy the items they wanted without having to compromise due to cost. Some purchases, such as social outings, provided opportunities for parents, carers and the children to bond as a family.
- Respondents perceived that the grant had a positive impact on their children in a number of ways. The BSG enabled children to take part in social and educational opportunities that families would otherwise have been unable to afford. Children experienced excitement at picking out new clothes, toys or participating in activities. Items such as new uniforms allowed children to feel

as if they fitted in with their peers. Educational purchases were thought to aid children's development (e.g. language and number skills, hand-eye coordination).

- As the respondents' views of the impact of the BSG were overwhelmingly and similarly positive, it was not possible to draw out any differences by family characteristics.

### **Suggested improvements to the Best Start Grant**

- The BSG was very well received by the respondents. The straightforward nature of the application process, the ability to spend the payment at key transitional stages of the child's life and its perceived positive impact were all reported by the parents and carers. The respondents were unanimous that, if eligible, they would apply for another payment in the future and would also recommend the grant to others.
- It was commonly reported that the BSG did not require any modification. Those respondents who did propose changes suggested that only slight adjustments were necessary, the benefit did not require a radical overhaul. Suggestions to improve the BSG centre around two broad themes; the application process and promotion of the grant.

### **Applying for the Best Start Grant**

- Respondents gave a number of suggestions which might improve the application process in the future. These were:
  - Improved communication in order that applicants are notified if the process is likely to be delayed, for example, through the use of a tracking system for individual applications.
  - The provision of dedicated staff for each BSG payment type at busy times to ensure applications are being processed promptly.
  - The provision of support and advice in terms of completing the grant application for those who experience difficulties in reading and writing, and for those who do not have English as a first language.
  - The availability of a greater choice to applicants regarding how they can communicate (e.g. online live chat function) or receive information about the application process (e.g. email, letter or text).
  - Online application format to be made more compatible with phone screens.
  - Streamline the process for those making multiple applications for different children within a specified time period.

### **Promoting the Best Start Grant**

- Respondents gave a number of suggestions related to the wider promotion of all three BSG payments to all eligible parents and carers, as there was a view that the grant is not yet widely known about. These suggestions were:

- Placement of posters and information in nurseries, libraries, doctor surgeries and shops.
- BSG information to be included in the 'Birth to Five' book given to new parents.
- Increased advertising and promotion of BSG on buses, billboards, TV and social media.
- Informing and/or training relevant health and social care professionals and support organisations about the BSG in order that they can promote it consistently to eligible parents and carers.
- Letters being sent by the Scottish Government to eligible individuals.
- Tailored and targeted promotion of the BSG to fathers, kinship carers, LGBTQ+ and Black and Minority Ethnic parents and carers to ensure that all eligible parents and carers are aware of the grant. Promotional material should include information about eligibility criteria.

### **Other suggested modifications**

- A few additional changes were proposed by respondents:
  - Provide option to receive the BSG payment in instalments to help them with household budgeting.
  - Pregnancy and Baby Payment: potential for the first payment for a family to be £600, even if is not for the first child.

### **Conclusions and implications for policy and practice**

The Best Start Grant (BSG) was viewed very positively by the respondents in the evaluation. The consensus was that the BSG application process was straightforward, the use of the grant led to positive outcomes for child and parent alike, it was not stigmatising to receive the payment and the BSG should be promoted in order that all eligible individuals apply for it. Importantly, the BSG was perceived as easing financial strain on low income families at key transitional stages for their children, and prevented some families from going into debt. As the respondents thought of BSG as an entitlement and not as a donation, it allowed them to spend it appropriately, increasing their confidence as parents and carers. As a result of the very positive reception for the BSG, any proposed modifications were relatively minor. This suggests that the BSG is already operating smoothly and successfully across Scotland, and only relatively minor changes should be considered in the near future.

Assuming that the BSG continues to operate in Scotland, consideration should be paid to the suggestions made by recipients to improve the benefit, particularly those which would enable greater awareness of eligibility for the grant.

Future research should also be considered. A quantitative survey of BSG recipients would enable the Scottish Government to examine the longer-term impact of BSG across Scotland. Follow-up qualitative research, also involving those who applied

unsuccessfully for the grant, should also be considered to explore the views of key interest groups in more detail.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Since its inception, the Scottish Government has made a clear commitment to eradicating child poverty and over the last 20 years there has been a significant reduction in child poverty rates<sup>1</sup>. However, since 2013, rates have increased, though not to the level recorded 20 years ago<sup>2</sup>. A renewed commitment to tackling child poverty was made in the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017. Ambitious statutory targets were set for 2030: less than 10% of children should be living in relative poverty; less than 5% in absolute poverty; less than 5% with combined low income and material deprivation, and less than 5% should be living in persistent poverty three years out of four<sup>3</sup>. The Act also requires Scottish Ministers to publish delivery plans for tackling child poverty, the most recent of which is the 2018-2022 delivery plan *Every Child, Every Chance*<sup>4</sup>.

This renewed commitment aims to utilise, where possible, the wider powers devolved to the Scottish Parliament following the 2014 independence referendum, the Smith Commission and, in particular, the range of social security powers devolved via the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018. Consequently, the Scottish Government has been able to introduce several new benefits aimed at tackling child poverty. The Best Start Grant (BSG) is one of these new benefits and forms part of the 2018-2022 delivery plan. In line with the belief that poverty is fundamentally driven by a lack of income, the BSG focuses on early years intervention and aims to provide lower-income families with financial support during the early years of a child's life. This focus on early years aligns with a considerable range of parallel policies aimed at improving children's outcomes and reducing inequality in early life such as the Family Nurse Partnership, the extension of the universal Health Visiting pathway, the Baby Box initiative and the expansion of statutory Early Learning and Childcare entitlement.

From December 2018, the BSG replaced and expanded upon the UK Government's Sure Start Maternity Grant. Unlike the Sure Start maternity benefit, there is no limit to the number of children in a family who can claim BSG. According to the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, it is hoped that the policy will have a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/blog/how-scotland-can-do-right-thing-loosen-povertys-grip-children>. The measures quoted are for relative poverty. Relative poverty is the proportion of children living in households with equivalised incomes below 60% of the median (middle) UK income in the current year.

<sup>2</sup> Scottish Government (2019) [Child Poverty update](#).

<sup>3</sup> [Child Poverty \(Scotland\) Act 2017](#) asp 6

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Government (2018) *Every child, every chance: the tackling child poverty delivery plan 2018-2022*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/child-chance-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-2018-22/>

small direct impact on material deprivation and possibly also an impact on poverty rates for a number of families.<sup>5</sup>

## 1.2 The Best Start Grant

The Best Start Grant is comprised of three possible payments to parents or carers who are in receipt of certain benefits<sup>6</sup> or are under 18 years old. These three payments are:

- Pregnancy and Baby Payment: a payment of £600 on the birth of a first child and £300 on the birth of any subsequent children
- Early Learning Payment: a payment of £250 for children between 2 and 3.5 years old to support child development
- School Age Payment: a payment of £250 to help with the costs of preparing for school.

The Pregnancy and Baby Payment replaces the Sure Start Maternity Payment but there is no UK equivalent for the Early Learning or School Age Payment. Since eligibility is tied to the receipt of particular benefits, claimants need to make separate applications for each payment and may not qualify for every payment. Applications can be made at any point in the BSG cycle. For instance, the first or only payment could be for the Pregnancy and Baby, Early Learning, or School Age Payment. At the point of application, if an applicant has children who are entitled to different parts of the Best Start Grant, they only have to complete one application in order to claim all the BSG payments that they are entitled to at that time.

Social Security Scotland began taking applications for each of the BSG payments at different dates:

- Pregnancy and Baby Payment: 10 December 2018
- Early Learning Payment: 29 April 2019
- School Age Payment: 3 June 2019.

## 1.3 This research

The BSG has only been fully operational since June 2019 and whilst initial case study evidence from Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) Scotland's Early Warning System is providing some insight in to the operation and impact of the BSG<sup>7</sup>, as of yet there has been no objective evaluative assessment of the success of the benefit or the impact the payments have had on recipients. As a result, the Scottish Government commissioned ScotCen Social Research in December 2019 to

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<sup>5</sup> Scottish Government (2018) *Every child, every chance*, p.189.

<sup>6</sup> If you are a parent over the age of 18, you can apply for the Best Start Grant (whether you're in work or not), if you are receiving one of these benefits: Universal Credit, Child Tax Credit, Working Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, Income Support, Pension Credit, Income-based Jobseekers Allowance (JSA), Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA). If you are a parent under the age of 18, you do not need to be on any payments or benefits to apply for Best Start.

<sup>7</sup> <https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/social-security-scotland-one>

conduct qualitative research to inform the evaluation, which will provide evidence on the early operation and impact of the BSG as well as to suggest improvements to its future function. It is important to note that Best Start Foods, another new benefit in Scotland, is not part of this current evaluation.

## 2 Methodology

### 2.1 Research aims and objectives

The overarching aim of the research was to understand the experience of families who have received one payment per child from the Best Start Grant (BSG) in the first 18 months of the benefit. These families may have received more than one payment overall if they have more than one child of qualifying age.

More specifically, the research aimed to explore and understand:

1. The impact BSG payments have had on the household finances of recipients at early transition points in children’s lives
2. How recipients have spent BSG payments
3. Whether BSG payments have enabled children to participate in social and educational opportunities that they otherwise would have been unable to participate in
4. Whether BSG payments have prompted any health and well-being benefits for recipient families and their children.

In addition to the four research aims, the Scottish Government set out nine research objectives and eight research questions. The research aims, objectives and questions are mapped out in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1. Research aims, objectives and questions**

Research Aims	Research Objectives	Research Questions
<b>1. To understand the impact BSG payments have had on the household finances of recipients at early transition points in children’s lives.</b>	To explore and identify the ways and extent to which BSG payments have impacted on recipients’ household budgets at critical transition points in their child’s life. To explore and identify whether the impact of BSG payments on recipients’ household finances varied by family circumstances/characteristics.	To what extent and in what ways have BSG payments impacted on the household finances of recipients at critical transition points in their child’s life? Does the impact BSG payments have on the household finances of recipients at critical transition points in their child’s life vary by family circumstances/characteristics?
<b>2. To understand how recipients have spent BSG payments.</b>	To explore and identify what goods or services families bought with their BSG payments and their reasons for choosing these goods or services. To explore and identify whether the goods or services families bought with their BSG payments, and their reasons for choosing these goods or services, varied by family circumstances/characteristics.	To what extent and in what ways have the goods or services families bought with their BSG payments, and their reasons for choosing these goods or services, varied by family circumstances/characteristics?

<p><b>3. To understand whether BSG payments have enabled child to participate in social and educational opportunities that they otherwise would have been unable to participate in.</b></p>	<p>To explore and identify the ways, and extent to which, BSG payments have enabled children to participate in social opportunities available where they live.</p> <p>To explore and identify the ways, and extent to which, BSG payments have enabled children to participate in educational opportunities available where they live.</p>	<p>To what extent and in what ways have BSG payments enabled children to participate in social opportunities available where they live?</p> <p>To what extent and in what ways have BSG payments enabled children to participate in educational opportunities available where they live?</p>
<p><b>4. To understand whether BSG payments have prompted any health and well-being benefits for recipient families and their children.</b></p>	<p>To explore and identify the ways, and extent to which, BSG payments have led to families making behavioural changes that are known to increase health and well-being (e.g. healthy food choices, participating in sport and exercise).</p> <p>To explore and identify the ways, and extent to which, BSG payments have impacted on recipient families' experience of stress and anxiety.</p>	<p>To what extent and in what ways have BSG payments led to families making behavioural changes that are known to increase health and well-being (e.g. healthy food choices, participating in sport and exercise)?</p> <p>To what extent and in what ways have BSG payments impacted on recipient families' experience of stress and anxiety?</p>
<p><b>5. To understand the implications of the research finding for policy and practice regarding the Best Start Grant.</b></p>	<p>To explore and identify any implications or research findings for policy and practice.</p>	<p>What are the implications of research findings for policy and practice?</p>

## 2.2 Research ethics

An application was submitted to NatCen Research Ethics Committee (REC) in early January 2020. Ethical approval for the research was granted by NatCen REC in late January 2020.

## 2.3 Recruitment

The research brief for the evaluation outlined that it may be possible to draw a sample of BSG recipients from the Social Security Scotland Satisfaction Survey being developed by Social Security Scotland. After discussion between the Scottish Government and ScotCen, it became clear that the sample information would not be available in time to assist the evaluation. As a result, ScotCen worked collaboratively with parenting and other gatekeeper organisations to recruit participants for the research.

A list of gatekeeper organisations, were identified by ScotCen<sup>8</sup>. Each organisation was initially contacted by email by a member of the research team and followed up, where necessary (or by request), by telephone to facilitate support for recruitment of BSG recipients. Any organisations able to support ScotCen with recruitment

<sup>8</sup> This list was added to throughout the fieldwork period to aid the recruitment of a wide range of parents and carers. By the end of the fieldwork period over 70 national and local organisations were contacted.

were provided with a clear and simple information sheet and privacy notice to distribute to interested respondents<sup>9</sup>. A weblink to an online version of these materials was also provided. In addition, organisations were offered a poster, promotional text and images to help promote the research to parents and carers in receipt of BSG in person, via emails and newsletters and on social media. All recruitment materials were written in lay language to make them accessible to a wide audience.

Organisations that agreed to promote the study informed parents and carers in receipt of BSG, and interested in the evaluation, to contact the research team directly, in order to discuss their possible participation in interviews. A few organisations offered to collect contact details of interested parents and carers, and with their consent, pass them securely to the research team (e.g. via a secure FTP folder). Everyone who expressed an interest in the research was sent an electronic copy of the information sheet and privacy notice and/or a link to an online version of these materials. All potential respondents were given the chance to speak to a member of the research team in advance to ask questions and enable them to make an informed decision on whether to participate in the evaluation. In order to participate in an interview, individuals had to be age 16 or above, have received at least one BSG payment and be able to provide informed consent to participate. A suitable time and date for an interview to take place was agreed with interested parents and carers.

## **2.4 Conducting the research**

The interview topic guide was developed in January 2020 in consultation with the Scottish Government. The interview explored BSG recipients' experiences of receiving a BSG, including:

- The process of applying for and receiving BSG payments including what has worked well, any barriers encountered in accessing BSG and any facilitating factors
- The range of ways BSG recipients spent their payments (including any social and educational activities children of BSG recipients have participated in)
- The perceived impact of BSG payments on the finances of recipients, particularly at key transition periods of a child's life
- The perceived impact of BSG payments on the health and well-being of recipient families and their children
- Any other perceived impact of BSG payments on the recipient families and their children

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<sup>9</sup> The information sheet stated the purpose of the research, who was conducting the research, who the funder was, what participating in the research would involve, the gift voucher respondents would receive, how the information respondents provided would be used and how respondents' personal details would be kept confidential. The privacy notice outlined in more detail how personal data are stored and used and respondents rights concerning the data they provide in line with the Data Protection Act 2018 and EU General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

- Any unexpected issues that have arisen from claiming for and being awarded BSG payment(s)
- Recipients' views of what modifications may be required to improve the BSG application award process and operation in the future.

Interviews were primarily going to be conducted face-to-face in the homes of parents and carers. However, as a result of lockdown related to Coronavirus (COVID-19), NatCen took an organisational decision from 17<sup>th</sup> March that all face-to-face fieldwork would be paused. As a result, in agreement with the Scottish Government, all interviews with BSG recipients that took place after 17<sup>th</sup> March were conducted by telephone<sup>10</sup>.

Interviews took place at times and dates convenient for respondents. Researchers were available throughout the day and evenings to accommodate the preference of respondents. All interviews were conducted by members of ScotCen's research team who are well trained and highly experienced in conducting qualitative interviews with a range of groups, including those deemed vulnerable or seldom heard.

On the day of a scheduled interview, before the interview began, the interviewer checked that the respondent had received and had a chance to read the project information sheet and privacy notice (either electronically or online). Respondents were reminded that the interview was confidential and would not affect the benefits or services they received. After the interview, all respondents received a £30 Love2Shop voucher as a thank you for giving up their time and an electronic useful contacts leaflet<sup>11</sup>. With the consent of respondents, all interviews were audio recorded using an encrypted digital recorder and transcribed for ease of analysis<sup>12</sup>. Verbal consent was recorded at the start of each interview. The average length of interview was 32 recorded minutes, with the longest interview lasting one hour.

## 2.5 Analysis

Qualitative analysis requires a robust and systematic approach which can be documented and demonstrated to an external audience. To achieve this, all transcripts were imported into and coded using NVivo 10, a software package for qualitative data analysis. This system of coding facilitates the organisation and analysis of qualitative transcripts and provides a tool to explore the range and diversity of views expressed by respondents. Firstly, the key topics and issues which emerged from the research objectives and the data were identified through familiarisation with transcripts by members the research team. A draft analytical framework was drawn up by the research team and piloted on the first few transcripts. The analytical framework was then refined after discussions within the

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<sup>10</sup> One interview was conducted in person before lockdown.

<sup>11</sup> This included information and contact details of services that could be useful to parents and carers e.g. parenting support, mental health support and financial support.

<sup>12</sup> Third party data security and confidentiality agreements are in place with the transcription services used by ScotCen. Recordings and transcripts are transferred via a secure FTP folder. Transcripts of interviews are stored in a secure folder and will only be accessed by the ScotCen research team.

wider project team. Once the analytical framework was finalised, each transcript was coded so that all the data on a particular theme could be viewed together.

Through reviewing the coded data, the full range of views and attitudes described by respondents were systematically mapped, and the accounts of different respondents, or groups of respondents (for example, those with divergent views of the impact of BSG payments), compared and contrasted.

## 3 Results

The research findings will outline the main themes that emerged from the research and explore any variations in views by respondent categories or demographics. The findings are presented thematically, beginning with respondent demographics. Next, respondents' experiences of the Best Start Grant (BSG) application process are explored before the respondents' uses of the grant payment are considered. Following this, the impact of the BSG on respondents and their families are examined. Finally, an exploration of ways in which respondents think the BSG could be improved is outlined.

### 3.1 Respondent demographics

Thirty-six parents and carers took part in the research.

Despite attempts to recruit both men and women to participate in the research, all but one of the respondents were female (though households which included men were represented). Up until December 2019, only 100 men had applied for and received a BSG or Best Start Foods grant therefore, the number of men eligible to take part in this research was very small<sup>13</sup>. The majority of respondents were from single parent households (n=24), though some single parents lived with family members including their parents and/or siblings (Table 1). A number of dual parent (n=10) and kinship carer households (n=2) also participated in the research. Families where the parent and/or child live/s with disabilities and/or long term conditions also took part in the research.

**Table 1: Household composition of respondents**

Household composition	Single parent	Dual parent	Kinship carer
No. of respondents (n=36)	24	10	2

Respondent households had between one and five children living within them, ranging from new-borns to age 17 (Table 2). A number of respondents also had older children in their 20s who no longer lived at home.

**Table 2: Number of children living in respondent household**

No. of children	1	2	3	4+
No. of respondents (n=36)	16	9	5	6

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<sup>13</sup> Social Security Scotland's Client Diversity and Equalities Analysis in December 2019 showed that 7% of those who applied for a BSG or Best Start Foods up until December 2019 were men. Further details can be found at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-security-scotland-client-diversity-and-equalities-analysis-to-december-2019/>

Respondents were aged between 18 and 51, with half aged between 18 and 29 years, but with good representation of those aged 30 to 51 years (Table 3).

**Table 3: Age of respondents**

Age of respondent	18-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40+
No. of respondents (n=36)	10	8	9	6	3

Half (n=18) of respondents were from non-working households (Table 4). Many of these respondents were single parents who were caring for their young children full time. Other households had at least one adult working full or part time in paid employment (n=10), unpaid employment (n=3) or were in, or soon to be starting, higher or further education (n=5).

**Table 4: Employment status of respondent households**

Employment status	Paid work	Unpaid work	In education	Not working
No. of respondents (n=36)	10	3	5	18

Respondents who had received a Pregnancy and Baby, Early Learning and/or School Age payment as their first BSG payment, participated in the research (Table 5). About half of respondents (n=17) had claimed more than one BSG payment for different children, including twins. Pregnancy and Baby payments were also claimed by respondents for their first child and subsequent children.

**Table 5: Type of Best Start Grant claimed by respondents**

BSG payment	Pregnancy and Baby	Early Learning	School Age	Multiple payments
No. of respondents (n=36)	20	25	7	17

Respondents lived in urban, small town and rural locations across Scotland including Aberdeenshire, Fife, Lothians, Lanarkshire, Glasgow, Ayrshire, and Dumfries & Galloway. These areas represented diversity in terms of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), with respondents living in the least and most deprived areas of Scotland (SIMD quintiles 1-5). However, the majority of respondents lived in SIMD quintile areas 1 and 2.

**Table 6: Geographic area where respondents lived**

Geographic area	Urban	Town	Rural
No. of respondents (n=36)	12	13	11

The ethnicity of respondents was not systematically collected. With the move to telephone interviews as a result of lockdown, it was decided that it would be harder to collect ethnicity data sensitively (as well as other data, such as household income) which may have resulted in respondents withdrawing from the research. From the interview discussions, there were respondents who described themselves as Asian but no other references to ethnicity were made. Respondents spoke of being born in Scotland, other parts of the UK and Europe.

## 3.2 Experience of the Best Start Grant application process

This chapter explores respondents' experience of the Best Start Grant (BSG) application process including how they heard about the grant, reasons for applying for the grant and any factors experienced that facilitated the process or were more challenging.

### 3.2.1 Respondent awareness of the Best Start Grant

Respondents reported becoming aware of the BSG in a range of ways. These included through:

- schools
- support organisations (e.g. One Parent Families Scotland, Home Start)
- money advice services
- the Job Centre
- healthcare practitioners such as midwives, health visitors and family nurses
- word of mouth from friends and family
- social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter)
- posters in nurseries
- information included in a letter about another benefit.

There were respondents who had heard about the BSG from multiple sources. One respondent gave the example of hearing about the Pregnancy and Baby Payment from her midwife and the Early Years Payment from a friend. However, other respondents stated that they had become aware of the BSG almost by chance and questioned whether they would have learned about the grant any other way.

“I got given the information from...let me get this right, I think I got it from two sources at the time. I got it from Home Start with regards to the baby, when I was pregnant and I got...also got told by my eldest daughter's Support Worker because my middle one was due to start school.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I'm sure the first time I heard about it was a Facebook article, so on Facebook, and then other people I knew, people who were also mums themselves posted online about this and then my mum, I think I read a newspaper article. So I had a few sources to find out about it.” (Multiple payment recipient)

The amount of information respondents received about the BSG varied. For some, the information they received was limited to their eligibility for the respective child to help with specific costs associated with having a new baby or the child starting nursery or school. In some cases, this led to recipients having to submit multiple applications in a short space of time as they had been unaware that multiple BSG payments were available for children at different ages. However, other respondents received fuller information regarding all three BSG payments, the ages of children for which they were available and eligibility criteria.

“I was just told that I could apply for this payment that would give me a grant to get things that I needed for the baby and they gave me the name of the website or whatever it was to go on to apply...I applied for the one for the baby first because I knew about that and then when I got told a week or so down the line that I could also apply for a Starting School one for the middle child I went back on and applied for that as well...Yeah I didn't realise you could get for older children.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I think I was given a leaflet and I looked it up myself to see a bit more about it. I know that there was like different payments and I think...there are like certain requirements to be able to apply for it.” (P&B Payment recipient)

“the first thing I remember hearing about it is that there was a grant available and there were 3 stages to it. That was obviously baby, nursery years and school years.” (SA Payment recipient)

Respondents spoke about their surprise that the BSG was available to them and their initial hesitance to complete an application due to their preconceptions that the grant would not be available to them or that they would not meet the eligibility criteria.

“At first I was a bit cautious as to whether it was aimed at our family or not so the literature was not, that leaflet was not completely clear, because our family get Child Tax Credits it sometimes, when that's put on a form sometimes that means our family and sometimes it doesn't because some benefits have an income cap as well as the child care criteria.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“Because I'm on benefits I kind of thought I won't be eligible for that.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“My friend, I've got a lot of friends obviously with kids so they had told me, and so I just applied. I didn't think I'd get it. Obviously when you work full-time you're kind of penalised.” (P&B Payment recipient)

### **3.2.2 Reasons for applying for the Best Start Grant**

Respondents applied for the BSG for a range of reasons. In general, parents and carers had applied for the grant either to meet the general financial needs associated with bringing up a family on a lower income or to meet a specific financial need associated with the age of their child or their family circumstances. Examples given of specific financial needs included preparing for a new baby, providing clothes for nursery or school uniform, or meeting the costs of moving to a new house. For some, their reason for applying for the BSG was to meet a shortfall in income due to changes to other benefits, such as Universal Credit replacing existing benefits or to top up other benefits such as clothing vouchers.

“I just applied for it just because of my situation, I was struggling and if I had...if somebody gave me that knowledge it would be daft not to apply for it if I was eligible for it.” (EL Payment recipient)

“The School Age Payment the resources really, like first year into school...bag, shoes, it's expensive, jackets, and the school kind of requires quite a lot as well as in uniform. Like they've got a specific uniform that they need to wear, specific shoes that they need to wear, so it does it adds up and to pay for that off my own income would have been probably a great struggle to be fair.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“Just because at the time it was going to really help us out, because that was when I was changing over to Universal Credit and I really didn't have money, to be fair. So I used the Best Start Grant for most of my son's uniform, and then I only had to add a little bit to it to get all his uniform for him.” (SA Payment recipient)

The use of the BSG to provide educational resources for their children was also cited as a reason for applying for the grant in a few cases. Parents and carers agreed that they thought the timing of the three grant payments worked well, as they tied in with times that extra expenditure was required.

“I decided to try and apply because I felt that it would benefit her, get her some educational things so it would because she was 2 coming on 3 so I felt if I managed to get that, I could get her more to help build up more of her learning skills...Try and advance her a wee bit.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I don't think you realise how much things you do need to buy for your kid starting school. It's like there's all the little things, like everything to fill their pencil case and their school bag, and their shoes and stuff, it all adds up, and before you know it, it's a lot of money. So I think that is really useful to have that, as a sort of safety.” (SA Payment recipient)

In addition, respondents applied for the BSG because they recognised that they were entitled to do so, and they felt the grant would have a positive impact.

### **3.2.3 Application process**

Overall, respondents provided very positive feedback on the BSG application process, commenting on the straightforward and smooth nature of the operation. The application process was favourably compared with the recipients' experiences of applying for other benefits. The clarity and simplicity of the application form, the facility to link the BSG application to information held through other benefits (e.g. the Baby Box), the relative speed of the process and the use of text messages to confirm receipt of the application were highlighted as aspects of the application process which had worked particularly well.

“I found the application process quite easy. It was actually the easiest thing I did.” (EL Payment recipient)

“It was easy. As I've said it was very easy to apply for so I would say that was much better, I was able to apply for it as soon as I started because when I was doing the maternity allowance, as I say, I kinda started it and then I was like

\*sigh\*, I need to pick this up again soon because I tried but the Best Start one was very, very easy. I managed to just finish it in one sitting.” (P&B Payment recipient)

In general, recipients found the BSG application form to be straightforward to complete and identified the length of the form, layout, clear wording, and use of ‘tick boxes’ as features which made the form easy to complete.

“It was really simple, once you go on the questions are laid out in such a way that its...I didn’t find it confusing, it was very sort of self...as I say self-explanatory, tick the box questions.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I just went online and I just followed the link and it was easy to understand, very simple, I liked that it broke it all down, it was really good because I’ve got dyslexia so it takes me some time to process information...it was really simple to understand so I was just able to apply for it...just on my own.” (EL Payment recipient)

“It was actually just simple, it weren’t like they wanted your life history. It was basically right it’s these details and then the child’s details...if you look at the form it is really, really easy.” (EL Payment recipient)

Respondents felt that the level of detail and personal information required to complete the form was appropriate and found the option to link personal details from other benefits applications or prior BSG applications to be useful. However, this option did not work as well for all recipients. For example, a respondent experienced problems when she submitted a BSG application for her third child. She opted for personal data to be retrieved from her Universal Credit application, but third or subsequent children are not included in records related to Universal Credit.

“I was happy for them to use my baby box application to check the details rather than having to fill in a very long form and that made things very straightforward and very easy to do.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“Yes, it was all online and because I’d already given them my bank details the first time, when I got the letter saying that they approved it and that I was eligible for these grants, they didn’t even need me to give bank details. They’d already had it stored.” (Multiple payment recipient)

The option to complete the BSG application form online was welcomed by respondents as this was found to be quicker and easier than completing the form on paper or over the phone, particularly when caring for young children. However, respondents appreciated being able to choose the format of their application to meet their needs, and the telephone helpline feature was also well-received.

“I found it a lot easier to just type stuff out and then send it away. When I was pregnant with him, I was dead heavy and I had contractions and see just trying to like, it’s an easy task for other people, but if you’ve got to try to go to the shop

and get a stamp or even if you don't need a stamp, to go and post it in a post box without forgetting and stuff like that. I found it was better to do it all online.”  
(Multiple payment recipient)

“It was really, really good and really easy to...you had to go through it in steps and it was really good. They explained everything in detail to me, she was really nice...as I say it was really really good, dead easy. I really hate letters and everything, so being able to do it over the phone is great.” (EL Payment recipient)

Some respondents completed the form without assistance and others received varying levels of help in completing the form from support organisations. Those who received help in completing their forms found this to be helpful, particularly in instances where the recipient had issues related to literacy.

“Yes, I've got dyslexia, so the bigger words and everything, I needed help with that.” (P&B Payment recipient)

Overall, the recipients reported that it took very little time for their application to be processed and the grant to be paid. Recipients spoke of their surprise at how quickly their application had been processed and thought that the process was completed within the expected 4 weeks. However, a minority of respondents stated that their applications took longer than this, and gave examples of waiting up to 8 weeks to have their BSG fully processed. On calling to enquire about the progress of their application, these respondents were often informed that there was a delay due to the high volume of claims being made following the introduction of the new grant.

“It wasn't long at all the whole process of it. It was really, really quick which I was surprised [at], I didn't expect it to be such a quick progress but it was quick.” (SA Payment recipient)

“It took quite a while actually...I had to phone and double-check on it...the girl I was speaking to was very nice and she said that they'd got quite a lot of applications at once so they were trying to work their way through it. So I think it must have been about 7 weeks or 8 weeks.” (P&B Payment recipient)

Payment of the BSG directly into their bank account was unanimously positively received by respondents, and was thought to be preferable to receiving the grant as a cheque. Respondents valued the ease and speed of having the grant paid directly into their bank account and felt that it helped them to keep track of their money.

“Yeah I prefer it coming into my bank rather than a cheque because it means I have to go outside and go to the bank and wait for the cheque to clear.” (EL Payment recipient)

“I do online banking so I can see what's going into my account and what's leaving my account. It obviously states the name of who's paid that into my

account so it's quite...yeah I would say that would be better." (Multiple payment recipient)

### **3.2.4 Communication regarding the Best Start Grant**

Overall, respondents gave positive feedback regarding the communication that they received from Social Security Scotland about the progress and outcome of their application. In particular, respondents who had made a phone call to Social Security Scotland regarding their BSG application described the call handlers as being friendly, helpful and supportive.

"Just the people on the phone were just dead kind and they made it a bit easier, that they were willing to help you." (P&B Payment recipient)

"If I had to phone and ask a question or check on a result, they were really helpful and quick and answered me on the phone as well. It wasn't like I was in hours of queues or anything. It was really straightforward and simple." (Multiple payment recipient)

The text message confirming that claimants' online applications had been received was also thought to be particularly useful, and reassuring to respondents that their application had been received and was being dealt with.

"I didn't have any complaints, everything was really easy to understand, I loved the texts, because that made me remember that I had applied for it and it was saved on my phone so...I could remember that." (EL Payment recipient)

"It was good to get updates, and it was good to get texts, because that's something that you see a lot. Because sometimes, I forget to check my emails and all that, so it's like, a text was good because it just comes up on your phone straightaway, so I liked that." (EL Payment recipient)

Overall, recipients found the letters that were sent by Social Security Scotland to be helpful and the information contained in them to be clear. However, a minority of respondents who had received a letter to inform them that their initial application had not been approved perceived that the basis for the rejection was not properly set out. It was also suggested that communicating by email may be more useful for some recipients.

"Yeah it explained what I had applied for, how much I was going to be getting, when I would be getting that money, it was very clear what I had applied for, what I would be getting." (Multiple payment recipient)

"I applied too early but obviously didn't...the letter didn't say that. The letter just stated basically that I wasn't getting that and that was it. So I wasn't sure why. I phoned up and they just said that oh you applied too early because I had to apply for both the pregnancy and the Sure Start one....Yeah it was pretty generic and it just said that I didn't qualify for it and that was it. Please apply again later but there was no reason, specific reason. If it had said I had just applied too early

or till your child is 2 or whatever, it would have been a bit more...I'd be like alright." (Multiple payment recipient)

"I think it would make it easier for a lot of people...if they could just like email you rather than sending letters...I know like some people like to have letters as like proof, they could email and send a letter but at least then they could email there and then." (P&B Payment recipient)

A few minor issues related to communication between Social Security Scotland and the respondents were raised. The most commonly reported issue was that the BSG was paid into recipients' bank accounts before they received the letter to inform them that their application had been successful. For some recipients, this was slightly confusing as they were unsure as to the origin of the payment. Other issues raised regarding communication were that a number of respondents did not receive any communication regarding their application, and as has been mentioned there was a lack of communication around increased waiting times for the BSG during periods of high demand.

"I can see how that could be a bit confusing for some people, that maybe they're no' sure what that money is. Even just now in the current climate or even before people maybe could'nae get into their bank to ask what is this money that's been paid into my account. So that was the only thing that the letter actually came after it." (SA Payment recipient)

"The money came in, I remember that, I couldn't figure out where it came from! At that point I'd forgotten about it, the money came in and I spent ages trying to figure it out...I spent a while trying to figure it out, figured it out the next day or two days later when I got the letter telling me I'd been awarded it." (EL Payment recipient)

"I got a text the next day to say, 'Thanks for your application, we're processing it,' and then that was the only correspondence I actually received from them." (Multiple payment recipient)

"Probably more communication. I had to phone to find out there was a delay, so even a wee text message or a wee email, saying, 'Just to let you know, we're experiencing a high volume of claims. We'll get it...' It's just something like that, a wee bit more communication, I think it settles the mind." (Multiple payment recipient)

### **3.3 Use of the Best Start Grant**

This section addresses respondents use of the BSG payments and any factors that influenced this choice, as well as any variation in BSG use by family circumstances or other characteristics.

#### **3.3.1 Respondent use of the Best Start Grant**

Overall, respondents had specific ideas on how to use the grant and spent the money as they had planned. Those who did not use the grant as intended stated

that receiving relevant items via family and friends, or the extended length of time taken to receive the grant, were the main reasons for this.

“Yeah well when I first heard about it I was going to get my pram, that was what I wanted with it but then I ended up getting a pram off my family, so I didn’t need the pram.” (P&B Payment recipient)

It was common for multiple items, activities or services to be bought with each of the BSG payments. These were often items families needed at these specific transitional ages such as cots, prams, nursery and school uniforms. In addition to these items, respondents used the grant for social and educational activities for children and the whole family, including outings during summer holidays, trips to see relatives and learning aids. A small number of respondents said that the grant payment had gone towards bills and household expenses during times of financial strain.

Respondents who had received more than one of the BSG payments tended to report spending the grant in similar ways to those who had only received one. Purchases relevant to the transitions of the age group where the most common use of the grant, with any remaining funds being spent on social and educational activities. However, there were respondents who received multiple payments who were also able to buy a range of items for older children including shared days out, shoes, beds and Christmas presents.

“If the older kids needed trainers, or trousers, or tops, or extra things for school...[without BSG] I would be able to find maybe an extra tenner for a pair of trainers but that would just be one kid, for one child. But now with the grant I can cover all the kids’ shoes.” (Multiple payment recipient)

Respondents generally spent all of the payment shortly after receiving it on items they needed. There were respondents who decided to hold back some of the payment they received to enable them to buy items they knew they would need in the future, for example, children’s clothes in larger sizes. A small number of respondents reported depositing part of the grant in a bank account for their child.

With each of the BSG payments, parents and carers spent the money in similar ways regardless of family characteristics. As has been said, most of the grant was spent on items families needed at the key transitional stages of birth, nursery and school. Too few examples were cited of the grant being used in different ways to draw any conclusions about respondent characteristics.

### **3.3.2 Pregnancy and Baby Payment**

Respondents who had received the Pregnancy and Baby Payment used the grant to purchase multiple items and activities (Table 7). Some respondents reported using the whole payment to buy items they needed for their newborn child. However, there were others who had money remaining from the Pregnancy and Baby Payment after buying the items they wanted. This is explored in more detail below.

**Table 7: Items bought with Pregnancy and Baby Payment**

Type of item	Examples
<b>Health and hygiene</b>	Milk, nappies, baby bath, shampoo and other baby toiletries, baby wipes, breast pump, bottles, dummies, steriliser, nursing bras, medicine, highchair
<b>For nursery</b>	Moses basket, cot, wardrobe, changing table/mat, bouncy seat, clothes, pram, toys, baby jumper
<b>Safety</b>	Car seat, mirror for car
<b>For mum</b>	Breast pads, pyjamas for hospital, takeaways
<b>For home life</b>	Vacuum cleaner, sofa, car
<b>Finance</b>	Savings
<b>Social activities</b>	Travel to visit family

### **Purchases for pregnancy and birth**

It was common for respondents to spend the grant on a wide variety of items that they thought they would have had to purchase during pregnancy or in preparation for the birth of their child, regardless of receiving the grant. There were parents and carers who reported having none of the items they required and having to buy everything they needed for the birth of their child whereas others already possessed some items before receiving the grant.

Respondents who had items for their baby before receiving the Pregnancy and Baby Payment had either experienced delays in receiving the grant so had to buy essential items or had been gifted items from friends and family. These respondents used the payment to buy additional health and hygiene products, clothes and items for the hospital stay.

“I ended up getting a pram off my family...all I needed was the last wee bits ‘n’ bobs...I just went and stocked up on nappies and wipes and I also had to get things for the hospital for myself...I had jammies I think but it was more like pads and things. I was quite prepared if you want to put it.” (P&B Payment recipient)

“I used that [P&B Payment] and just got everything I needed like blankets, clothes, a bunch of baby grows because I already had the pram and stuff, so I just had to get clothes for him. I’m sure that was near him being born I got that, so I had most of the stuff.” (Multiple payment recipient)

Respondents also spoke of the grant being helpful because it allowed them to bulk buy items for the baby’s arrival. These purchases helped parents and carers feel prepared for the baby’s birth and the early stages of the baby’s life.

“What I did was I bought so many one size, so many the next size and so on, just so I knew that although the grant may have been finished, I was okay because I had different sizes of nappies and plenty of milk, I had everything all kinda all set up for him.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“It was nice to be able to like get things in bulk that we would use every day so that we didn’t have to go through the stress of...you know you just forget things. So it was nice not to be able to get home and find we’ve run out of nappies.” (P&B Payment recipient)

There were parents and carers with more than one child who used the Pregnancy and Baby Payment to purchase items that helped caring for all of their offspring. Baby swings, bouncy seats and double buggies were all items that respondents bought to assist them as a parent or carer of young children.

“I bought, a baby swing. I didn't have one with [name of son], but I thought having a second baby and being on my own, I could put her in there when [name of son] needs my attention.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I had to buy a double buggy because having the older two as well I really needed a double one, even though one of them was walking...it was basically baby essentials to get me up and running for the two.” (Multiple payment recipient)

### **Household purchases**

Not all respondents had spent all of the payment once they had bought all of their intended items. Respondents used the surplus money in a number of ways. There were respondents who used some of the payment to purchase items that they otherwise would have been unable to afford, including items to aid breastfeeding. Other respondents used some of the grant payment to purchase household items they lacked such as a vacuum cleaner or a sofa. A small number of respondents held back some of the payment they received either to allow them to buy clothes in bigger sizes to prepare for the baby’s growth or to put towards a bank account for the child.

“I’m breastfeeding so it was quite hard to come across breastfeeding bras...but every time I did find them, they were really expensive. Because money was tight, I wasn’t willing to buy it, but then with that [BSG] money I’d ended up getting a few of them. That really did help there.” (P&B Payment recipient)

“I remember there was just a wee bit left over and I remember getting a new [vacuum cleaner], I think it was about £20 or something out of Asda...It was for the house.” (P&B Payment recipient)

“Yes, so at the time, I had just left my relationship...I had to start from scratch, so getting keys to my house and trying to source, obviously I left with nothing, so a couch, white goods, all that type of thing. So it was a lot.” (Multiple payment recipient)

### **Educational and Social activities**

The Pregnancy and Baby Payment was used by some for social and educational activities for the baby and family. For example, one respondent purchased flights to visit family members abroad to introduce them to the baby, something that they said they would have been unable to afford without the grant. The payment could

be used in this way as money had already been saved in order to buy everything needed for the baby.

“Flights...It’s not your average answer I suppose but...I really wanted to go and show her off to my family...I kind of had everything I needed anyway for the baby, the pram and all that...You’ve got 8-9 months to do that and I worked like an absolute trojan as you can imagine. I worked as much as I could doing anywhere between three and five shifts, 12 hour shifts a week just really squirrelling away.” (P&B Payment recipient)

### 3.3.3 Early Learning Payment

Similar to the Pregnancy and Baby Payment, respondents who had received the Early Learning Payment used it to buy multiple items and to take part in activities (Table 8).

**Table 8: Items bought with Early Learning Payment**

Type of item	Examples
<b>Nursery uniform and supplies</b>	Jumpers, polo shirts, indoor and outdoor play clothes (e.g. wellies, waterproofs, sunhat, jacket, gloves/hat/scarf), nursery snack fees, catering for dietary requirements, stationery
<b>For child</b>	Sleeping aids, toddler beds, bedding, clothes
<b>For home life</b>	Car seat, car
<b>Finance</b>	Savings, debt repayment, bills
<b>Educational activities</b>	Magnetic letters and numbers, play dough, snakes and ladders, art supplies, sensory toys
<b>Exercise</b>	Swimming lessons, waterproof clothing and shoes
<b>Social activities</b>	Travel to visit family, trip to the beach, amusement park, trampolining, soft play, leisure centre, nature parks, out for lunch
<b>Celebrations</b>	Birthday and Christmas presents for the child and family

#### Purchases related to transitional stages

The majority of respondents used some or all the Early Learning Payment to purchase items their children required to start nursery. Parents and carers emphasised the expense of nursery uniforms specifically, but also described the expense of having to buy multiple sets of indoor and outdoor clothing to facilitate play.

“I bought the actual nursery uniform...Yeah it was just polo shirts and jumpers. I think alone that cost like £60 or £70. So it did help...Bag, like shoes, slippers, gym shoes, leggings, and just old kinda clothes that you don’t really care if they get minging at nursery. Everything was to do with her education.” (EL Payment recipient)

“He got stuff, a whole lot of stuff for starting his nursery and a wee bag, his gym shoes everything. It covered so much stuff, I don’t know how I would have done it before to be honest.” (EL Payment recipient)

Parents and carers reported spending some of the Early Learning Payment on items related to their child becoming a toddler. This included purchases of beds for toddlers, and specific bedding and items related to toilet training. Respondents said these purchases helped them feel confident in this key transitional stage.

“That helped me get that [proper cot bed]...and his bedding sheets, because I was going to be potty training and he was going into his new bed. I didn’t feel confident about him going in his new bed and so it covered a lot of the stuff I needed for him taking that step into his toddler years.” (Multiple payment recipient)

As would be expected, respondents described this age as a time when children grow out of their clothes quickly. Parents and carers used part of the grant to accommodate this, either buying several sizes for children to grow into or holding some of the payment to allow for this in the future.

“I bought him the size up as well. I bought him 3-4 and 4-5 and in Primark I think all in all I spent like £217...he’s still got shoes to grow into. So I got him two, size 10 and 11. He’s size 9 at the minute. And even underwear, I went and got him pants and boxer shorts and a bigger size socks.” (EL Payment recipient)

There were respondents who received the Early Learning Payment who used some of the grant to purchase items related to their child’s allergies. For these respondents the grant allowed them to leave items at nursery and ensure their child’s dietary requirements were met.

“[Name of child] can’t even use certain baby wipes, certain soaps...so obviously I’m going to have to supply things like that for the school...I’ve got to pay for their milk because obviously the milk you get at school is bog standard milk...I kind of put aside [money] to make sure that the kids were getting the best they could get.” (Multiple payment recipient)

### **Additional purchases**

The Early Learning Payment was also used to buy items not directly related to the child’s transitional stage. Often these were things that respondents perceived they would have been otherwise unable to afford, such as assisting them to purchase a family car or a specific type of car seat.

“So we were reviewing what we would do with her car seat and we wanted to keep her rear facing because we felt that was safer for her. But some of the larger rear facing car seats are more expensive than others on the market and therefore we were able to make a more expensive choice than we might have otherwise done because of the grant money.” (Multiple payment recipient)

Other respondents stated that the grant payment had gone towards bills and debt repayments. Respondents also reported using the grant to ease the financial burden around special events such as Christmas and birthdays.

“I was like, 'I'm going to use this on his Christmas', so I spent the whole thing on his Christmas, which really helped me out. I bought a lot of clothes. I bought three pairs of shoes, and then I bought loads of books, because [name of child] [is] really into books, and I think I bought a couple of toys.” (EL Payment recipient)

Respondents also reported using the Early Learning Payment for future planning. For example, respondents cited saving some of the payment for unforeseen emergencies, for delays in starting nursery and to set up a bank account for the child.

“Well we've kind of put some of his by for when he...he doesn't start nursery until like 30th November because of when his birthday falls. So we know he's going to need like indoor shoes, wellie boots, waterproofs, jackets, do you know...those kind of things as well. So I've put some of his money by for that.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I used most of it and I kept the rest of it in her bank account, she's got a bank account for when she's older.” (EL Payment recipient)

### **Educational activities**

Respondents reported using part of their Early Learning Payment on a wide range of educational toys and activities. Respondents outlined purchasing items they felt would help their child's learning and development, as well as enabling the child to develop a more settled routine.

“I got her [play dough] to help with her colours...I bought her a big snakes 'n' ladders to learn her to count...I bought her like wee numbers and letters, so I did, and pens and pencils and crayons and that to help her colouring and writing and that because her hand coordination was'nae that good...I bought her like this wee bath toy as well, ken to help her coordinate moving water, so I did.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I remember buying a projector starlight because their sleeping was not great which ended up being amazing for them. It just helped settle their routine a bit more.” (EL Payment recipient)

A respondent described taking advice from a health visitor before purchasing items to assist with the child's autism. It was also reported that part of the grant was used to support children's learning during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

“[Name of child] was for his autism. I managed to get him some stuff that I couldn't before, like lights and shapes and stuff like that, that he could use before going to nursery...he's got his ball pit, he's got his lights, and he's got all the sensory stuff that he needs.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“But obviously with the way things are just now and not being able to do very much the kids are running out of resources in the house. So I’ve bought more things for them to do, like activity things in the house, pens, paints, things like that.” (Multiple payment recipient)

Respondents who had received the Early Learning Payment were also able to purchase goods and services which enabled their children and family to be more active. For example, outdoor clothing such as waterproof jackets and shoes were bought to enable children to participate in outdoor physical activities.

### **Social activities**

In comparison to the other BSG payments, respondents who had received the Early Learning Payment were more likely to state that they had spent at least some of the grant on different social activities for their child and family.

Respondents took their children on a variety of trips including day trips, shopping and other activities that required entry payment or travel costs. Examples of these social activities included: sessions at soft play, trampolining and leisure centres; amusement parks; days out at the beach and visiting relatives. It was also stated that part of the payment had been utilised to keep the child occupied during the summer holidays and to create family memories before the child started nursery.

“It was really all down to that payment to be honest...I took them for a wee day down to the beach...just a play and ice-cream...It worked out as a family ticket anyway so it wasn’t too dear. I wanted to go somewhere where they had that extra money with them after I’d got the stuff I needed in.” (EL Payment recipient)

“I’d read online that it didn’t have to be purchases for anything specific, like it didn’t have to be uniforms, it pretty much could be used on anything...I can remember I bought stuff online to keep them occupied during the summer, like outdoor chinks...and arts and crafty bits. I’m sure that through Groupon I bought a few things for soft play and trampolining to keep them occupied a bit, to help me throughout the summer.” (Multiple payment recipient)

### **3.3.4 School Age Payment**

Respondents who received the School Age Payment used the grant in more uniform ways which are detailed below (Table 9).

**Table 9: Items bought with School Age Payment**

Type of item	Examples
<b>School uniform</b>	Blazer, shirts, polo shirts, skirts, pinafores, tights/socks, shoes, indoor and outdoor PE kit, hair bows
<b>School supplies</b>	School bag, pencil case, lunch box, stationery
<b>For child/home</b>	Bunk beds

### **Purchases related to starting school**

It was common for respondents who had received the School Age Payment to spend most of the grant on items related to the transition to primary school. A school uniform was seen as a significant expense, with parents and carers reporting that they had to contribute their own money to supplement the grant money in order to purchase the school uniform. In addition to this, parents and carers also used the grant to buy outdoor clothing and shoes.

“Basically getting her all her school uniform, school bag, school shoes, jacket, everything that she was going to need for school. And there was some of that left after I had bought her everything but I kept that and then when winter came around she got boots and a thicker jacket and stuff like that for the winter with it.”  
(Multiple payment recipient)

Parents and carers who received the School Age Payment largely reported spending the entire payment on school uniform and school supplies. One respondent used the entire payment to purchase bunk beds.

## **3.4 Impact of the Best Start Grant**

This chapter explores what impact, if any, the respondents perceived the BSG had on their children, themselves and their wider families. This includes exploring any impact the grant has had on household finances, health and well-being and opportunities to take part in educational or social activities. Finally, an examination of whether the perceived impact of the grant varied by key characteristics is also explored.

### **3.4.1 Household finances**

Respondents were unanimous in the view that the BSG had made a positive impact on their household finances. However, the ways and extent to which the grant was reported to impact on a respondents' household finances varied.

#### **Debt prevention**

There were respondents who reported that the BSG had helped ensure that their household finances did not lapse into debt. The BSG payments were used to purchase items that their children needed at a key transitional time; purchases that would have almost certainly been made, regardless of the grant being available. Therefore, without the BSG a number of respondents said that they would have gone into debt because they did not have the finances to buy these items.

“The same as anybody else would have done, do you know what I mean? Just try and provide somehow...I think I would probably be in more debt if it wasn't for the Best Start Grant.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“It's like the nursery coming to me and saying the kids need wellies...they need to have stuff to leave in the nursery...You cannae just afford to go out and buy wellies, hats, gloves, jacket, and stuff to leave at the nursery...I've got more money in the future because I'm not having to pay back whatever I've borrowed. I suppose it's kind of made a difference that way.” (Multiple payment recipient)

There were parents and carers who stated that they often had just enough money to cover essential bills and payments for food and utilities. For these respondents, preparing for a new baby, a child's growth spurt and/or a child starting nursery or school created a financial strain. They described the BSG as having a positive effect on their finances in that it offered them more freedom; they did not have to choose between paying bills or buying items for their children, they could afford to do both.

“Well, I would say if I wasn't able to get them [BSG payments], I really would have struggled to get set up. Obviously Universal Credit wouldn't pay for a third child, so I would have been using normal finances, which means there would have been times it [bills] wouldn't have been getting paid...I would not have been able to afford it and I wouldn't have been able to keep up with the wee growth spurts and things. I would have been in debt because I've used money elsewhere.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“She had everything she needed and I didn't go into debt trying to get it...It's meant that there was money there for that stuff without having to try and dip into what money I do have coming in. Which meant it left my usual money for my usual shopping and bills so I didn't face any further financial hardship.” (Multiple payment recipient, P&B Payment)

Among the group who stated that without the BSG they would have gone into debt, there were a number of respondents who reported that they would have taken out a loan, either with a formal body or with a family member, to purchase the items they needed for their children. Borrowing money in this way would have resulted in these respondents having to repay the loan, and they also thought that it would have negatively impacted on how they felt about themselves.

“I think I'd have to turn to somebody, and then if I turned to somebody then I'd probably be in a lot of debt with them...It would have made me feel bad, because I'd probably have to make a repayment plan with them, instead of paying them back in full.” (EL Payment recipient)

“I would genuinely have to just borrow money off my family...I don't think anybody's really in a position to just be giving away money, so that would have just been debt that would have been building, sort of thing. The more I would have needed to have borrowed, obviously the more I'd have needed to have paid

back, and I think that would have just been really stressful as well.” (SA Payment recipient)

### **Provision of purchasing choice**

Not all respondents said that they would have gone into debt without access to the BSG. There were also parents and carers who stated that if they had not received the BSG they would have bought fewer items, cheaper items or more essential items over a longer period of time. The BSG was thought to benefit these parents and carers by enabling them to buy new or multiple products, rather than second-hand items, particularly for nursery and school uniforms. It was argued that buying new clothing resulted in better quality items that would not need replaced so quickly. Similarly, it was perceived to be important to mark an important milestone, such as the child’s first day at school, and made the parents and carers feel more positively if their children were wearing new clothes.

“I would have probably had to wait and save up to get his nursery clothes. He would’nae have had enough changes you know like one for wash, one on him, one for in the cupboard sort of thing. I wouldn’t have been able to do that if I didn’t have the grant. It would have been a case of like on that day washed and dried and then back for the next again day.” (EL Payment recipient)

“She probably wouldn’t have half the things she does, I probably would have just been going and getting cheap stuff. She wouldn’t be able to have a uniform like the other kids have and she wouldn’t be able to have like the luxuries that other kids have got. The money helped a lot to buy extra things...Like nice jackets and stuff like that and shoes that will last.” (EL Payment recipient)

“The first year of your kid at school is a big one...it helped me with stress with the whole fact that that’s there and I don’t need to worry about her going to school with nothing. She went to school and she was happy with what she had on and her stuff throughout the year.” (SA Payment recipient)

Another way the BSG was described as benefiting families was that it enabled a number of parents and carers to buy the item(s) they wanted without having to compromise due to cost. Examples of this included respondents being able to afford a more expensive, potentially safer, model of car seat, a crib that helped the mum to breastfeed and colic medicine that the respondent believed alleviated her child’s symptoms.

“The [bedside sleeping] crib was, I had a Moses basket from [older son] and I thought, at the end of the day, the baby has got a bed to lie in, that's what's important, but being able to lie next to me, it made things so much easier with the breastfeeding...it was an item that, she wouldn't have suffered if she didn't have it. It just, it made things a lot more easy for me.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I would definitely say it was a relief to me, and so much of a comfort just to know that we were trying our best, we were doing the best to help him. Knowing that I was able to try my best to ease his discomfort. Just being able to get the top, the best stuff we could...we got [branded infant colic medicine], we didn’t have to try

and find cheaper alternatives. The more expensive stuff, we know people who'd used it and it worked for, so it was nice to be able to do that...we were able to buy the best options we could for him and it really made a difference to him."  
(P&B Payment recipient)

### **Provision of more purchasing control**

Receiving the BSG also allowed parents and carers to buy what they needed for the children *when* they needed it. Without the grant, there were parents and carers who said they could not afford the items at the appropriate times, and they would have had to go without the items until they had saved up enough money. In some situations this may not have had too negative an impact on families, though others thought this would have been quite detrimental, as it would have resulted in families not being able to go outside as quickly without access to a buggy, children having to wear old or cheaper shoes that hurt their feet, or sleep in a bed or cot that they had outgrown.

"It would have taken me six months to put money away for two second-hand beds. I would have got what they needed but it would have taken a lot longer. The double buggy that wasn't essential to begin with because I could have stayed in with the twins and the kids until I had it, but having that enabled us, just because I had babies, my eldest two and we were still able to all get out for a walk or go out into the garden sort of thing." (Multiple payment recipient)

"I wouldn't have been able to afford shoes that she would have been fine in. So it made a massive improvement for that because it would have been probably cheap shoes that wouldn't have...that would have maybe hurt her." (SA Payment recipient)

Not having to wait to save money as a result of receiving the BSG allowed one parent to travel overseas to visit family. This not only had a positive impact of the family but allowed the parent to do this at a time that benefited her, and arguably also had a positive impact on the wider family.

"I wouldn't have been able to go if it wasn't for that. It's true, no way...I'd still have been saving now...I mean it's still something I would have done...but it would have took me a long time and it probably would have been an absolute nightmare with a toddler. Like just thinking about going with her now, it just curls my toes. She's running about all over the place." (P&B Payment recipient)

### **Money for siblings**

The BSG was thought to help household finances by not only giving families the resources they need for a child at a key transitional stage, but also by allowing parents and carers with more than one child to buy items for the other siblings. A number of respondents perceived that receiving the BSG resulted in them being able to afford to buy older children shoes, new beds and Christmas presents which they would have been unable to do without the grant.

“Well it made a big difference for us when I first got the baby payment because that was right at Christmas I had the baby, so obviously I was trying to get Christmas in for the older two kids and then obviously having the baby on top of it so the money kind of just came in really handy at that time because it was stuff I wouldn’t have been able to get them at the time with my own money. So I would have had to wait until after Christmas.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“When I was buying the older beds for my older children, they probably could have gone another couple of months in a cot, if they had to, but because I had that money to buy them a bed there and then, they were able to keep up and move on at the pace they should be and not be held back because of me not having the finances. They were able to go into a big boy’s bed and be independent and not be sleeping in a cot. They were able to get new shoes when they needed them and to be running and playing outside and stuff like that.” (Multiple payment recipient)

### **3.4.2 Health and well-being of parents**

There was consensus among the respondents that receiving the BSG had a positive impact on their own health and well-being as parents and carers, in a number of ways.

#### **Reduction in stress and anxiety**

It was common for parents and carers to say that receiving the BSG alleviated stress and anxiety they felt as a result of financial worries. Respondents spoke about their need to manage their household budgets carefully, and that the BSG helped relieve, if not always remove, the perceived financial pressure. This was particularly the case for respondents who were going through a very difficult time financially or for those who needed to make larger purchases for their families.

“Well it means that I could, I could’ve paid all my bills and stuff for the house, without having to worry how I’m going to get a pram and how I’m going to be able to do other things, because it took the stress off really.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“It took a lot of stress off of us because my partner wasn’t working at the time and if I never got that payment we wouldn’t have been able to buy what we did...it made us not worry and I didn’t feel bad for not being able to have things ready for when the baby came.” (P&B Payment recipient)

“It saved me worrying about where I was going to get his nursery clothes from because you have to pay, when you order it, you have to pay for it there and then and I’m sure it was either £50 or £60 it cost. I wouldnae be able to put that kind of money by myself in one go.” (EL Payment recipient)

Respondents with experience of depression and anxiety thought that the BSG had eased their financial worries somewhat, with a positive impact on their mental health.

“I suffer from depression and I had gotten a lot worse with my depression due to panicking how I was going to be able to provide for a baby. It was to the extent that I was sort of not sleeping at night and stuff, so when I was able to get that money to help that was like a huge weight had been lifted... Took the pressure away.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I suffer from anxiety and depression, so it did help ease the mind a bit. I tend to worry quite a lot about money and everything, but it did ease my mind and everything, so it did help a little.” (P&B Payment recipient)

Receiving the BSG helped a number of respondents feel prepared for their child’s key transition stage. Whether it was preparing for a baby’s arrival or a child starting nursery or school, being able to buy what was needed at a time that suited the parents and carers helped reduce their anxiety.

“It enabled us to get her some more things really and get her room decorated and buy some things for the house because we’d just moved not long before it. So, it just made settling into a new house, preparing for her coming a lot easier.” (P&B Payment recipient)

“I mean it got me right through my pregnancy if you want to put it. I was able to go and just get everything and then settle for the rest of the weeks that I had. So it didn’t cause any, I didn’t have to stress about not having this or not having that. Or not being ready.” (P&B Payment recipient)

### **Increased self-esteem**

There were respondents who reported an increase in their self-esteem as, with the aid of the BSG, they were able to provide what their children needed. Parents and carers recalled that without the BSG in previous years they had been unable to provide new items for their children, for example, starting a new school year. On these occasions this had made them feel that they had let their children down, whereas receiving the BSG had allowed them to provide for their children and overcome that negative feeling.

“It’s supposed to be a happy time you know, they’re starting school, it’s taken a few years to get to that point. So it’s nice to stand there with them and no’ be all stressed. I’ve done in the past years where I’ve had to send the boys to school with a bag from the school year previously because I had enough money to cover the uniform but I did’nae have enough money to get them a new school bag... I know you’ll probably be like oh it’s trivial it’s a school bag but as a parent that can make you feel that you’ve failed a wee bit because you’ve no’ been able to provide that for them. So that’s how I think it’s nice if the financial is alleviated a wee bit.” (SA Payment recipient)

“It made me feel a lot better within myself because I was able to get jumpers and polo shirts and it really done wonders for my well-being because I just... I was like that’s great he’s got what he needs and he’ll fit in his wee class, he’s got his jumpers and his polo shirts. It really lifted my spirits. And to be honest that was the most positive thing. It was just really nice to be able to provide for him and

not having to rely on other people to help me. It was just nice to be able to do it on my own.” (EL Payment recipient)

A number of respondents emphasised the importance of being prepared for key transitional stages in order that their children did not feel different from their peers. Being able to afford nursery and school uniforms seemed to be an important part of this. One respondent recalled the reaction her child received going into nursery wearing new clothes bought with the BSG, with the acknowledgement and praise from nursery staff increasing her own confidence and pleasing both mother and son alike. Another responded described “the peace of mind” of knowing they had done all they could to provide for their child.

“It actually made me feel great because when I dressed him for nursery even the teachers were like ‘oh wow you’ve got new shoes, they’re so great and you’ve got a new jacket’. Of course his little face is like ‘I know’ and it made me feel great because I was like oh right, that’s kind of picked my confidence up I could actually imagine what they would be thinking if I’d sent him back in short clothes and a pair of welly boots...because I thought wow if people are noticing what a 2 year old is wearing, what are other people thinking.” (EL Payment recipient)

“Everyone else is wearing the uniform and stuff, and the last thing you want to do is to send them in with normal clothes because you haven't been able to buy anything specifically for nursery. The last thing I want to do is have her any different from anybody else, so it was a huge help.” (Multiple payment recipient)

Other respondents were aware that that the BSG enabled them to buy the things they needed for their children on their own, without having to depend on support from others. For some this was a matter of pride because they had always provided for themselves, whereas for others, for example young parents, it was important for illustrating to others that they could cope with the parental role. It is worth noting that only one respondent viewed the BSG as an external party providing for the child; the consensus was that the grant assisted the recipients to manage their own budgets and increase their own sense of financial independence.

“I probably still would have bought them, but most likely it would have been family members that had bought them...Then it’s more the case of feeling that everybody has done it for you rather than you’ve done it for yourself...because of my age everybody was trying to say, ‘Oh, she’s young having a kid’ and all that, but it was good to just prove them really, because you had your own money and you did it yourself, so they couldn’t say anything.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I’d always been able to provide for myself. I went straight from college, community college to uni to working and then suddenly for it being out of my control to be able to save for things for my own child was really, really difficult...Obviously it was pride as well, but I [would] never have had him go without when other people were willing to help but it was just more of a...It just made me feel much more confident as a mum to know that I was able to provide for him sort of thing.” (P&B Payment recipient)

### 3.4.3 Health and well-being of children

In addition to the perceived positive impact the BSG was reported to have on the health and well-being of parents and carers, respondents perceived that the BSG also benefited the health and well-being of their children.

#### **Excitement of picking out new clothes and toys**

A number of parents and carers said that the BSG allowed their children to become involved in choosing items that were to be purchased through the grant. Being involved in choosing new shoes, school bags or toys was thought to create a sense of excitement in the children. Picking out items for the first day of school was also seen as an important rite of passage and an opportunity to create familial memories.

“I let her pick her bag for her first year...She was excited, I think it’s just part of the process to let her know that she’s a big girl now, she can think for herself, let her pick the bag that she wants to wear and the pencils that she wants to write with. So it was exciting for her to do that.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“Well, it created a memory going to pick her blazer for the first time and trying it on, and the excitement of getting ready to go to school, as cheesy as that sounds.” (Multiple payment recipient)

Being able to take into account their children’s preferences was a positive experience for the parent/carer too. Respondents stated that without the BSG they would have not been able to afford to involve their child in picking out these items, especially school uniforms, as they would have had to choose what they could afford. As has been mentioned previously, parents and carers perceived it to be beneficial if the children were able to wear similar items of uniform to their peers.

“It’s probably took a bit of pressure off and allowed me to let them have an input into what they want for going to school, whereas before I would have just had to say [name of son] this is what you’re getting pal and that’s it. Whereas he’s got his Spiderman shoes, he’s got a wee Spiderman T-shirt you know...They’ve got to be their own person haven’t they with their own styled and I think it’s given them the freedom to do that.” (Multiple payment recipient)

#### **Family relationships**

There were parents and carers who said that receiving the BSG payment helped improve family relationships. Purchases provided opportunities for parents, carers and siblings to bond. One example was a family using the grant to buy toys for a child with autism. Not only did these purchases help the child’s well-being, it also enabled the child to play with his/her siblings. Another example was a parent using the payment to buy toys which they could use with their child to increase bonding.

“It’s made him more happy, he’s not just sitting watching everybody else play with their toys...like the big ones will go into his corner and interact with him whereas before they wouldn’t because they would just stand there and just look. But now that [name of child] wants to play its making them, that bond as well. I think it’s had a huge impact on everybody.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“It’s managed to get the bond a wee bit more so it has because I struggled to bond with her. Just with after my labour and that I took not well after having her. So it was hard to bond with her so I actually got to bond a wee bit better with her and able to sit and play with her and that...It just gave us a wee bit extra bonding time to be able to go out and get her the stuff that I wanted to get with the grant. It gave us a wee bit of time to go and spend with her and get us out for a wee while.” (Multiple payment recipient)

## **Social opportunities**

Receiving the BSG enabled a number of families to take part in social opportunities they would have otherwise been unable to participate in. These respondents reported that the grant allowed them to go on outings and social activities with their children that previously could have been prohibitively expensive. This included activities such as visiting soft play and trampolining centres, theme or activity parks and enjoying meals out. Importantly, the grant was thought to reduce any associated financial stress with the result that respondents could enjoy the day more too.

“When I’ve had that payment, that was a chance for us to be able to go out and do a lot more things that cost money, like a soft play, buying his meal in the soft play, as a deal. I don’t normally do that because I can’t do it. Normally, I’ll take lunch with me or whatever, but it gave me the chance to be able to go out and spend that wee bit extra of my money on him...It felt good. It felt like happy, not having to worry!” (EL Payment recipient)

“The two trips, there was no way I would have been able to do them because...[play park] I think it was like £22 for us to get into that and £18 or £22 for the chocolate bean factory for the experience and the indoor and outdoor play. That’s not something...we can afford to do. Usually its parks and things that are free that I go for.” (EL Payment recipient)

The grant also enabled parents and carers to purchase clothing, equipment and tuition that would allow their children to take part in more physical activity either individually or socially with the family.

“Oh yes, definitely, getting us all out into the fresh air and also you know that example of the shoes, getting sturdy shoes. I wouldn’t have had the money to go on the bus to go and get their shoes fitted, to get them proper shoes so that they can go and run up down the paths and forests when they’re out. They’re proper fitted shoes that fit them for that age. I know it sounds small and silly, but it even helped me to do stuff like that.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I actually got her into swimming lessons with it as well, so it actually paid for her first block of lessons that she maybe would have had to wait for.” (EL Payment recipient)

There were also respondents who stated that the grant allowed them to travel more widely, which resulted in a more memorable day out for the whole family. It was also said that the grant enabled all of the family to take part in activities, whereas

without the grant there may have only been enough money for one child to participate.

“It was a lovely day being on the train with my kids and the full trip, just doing something with them together further out than more local parks or whatever. We still laugh about it to this day actually, sometimes. I did not take a change of clothes and when he went into the water and he lost his balance, he got a wet bum.” (EL Payment recipient)

“It was nice to be able to afford it. It was nice to see him enjoying himself, it was nice to make memories and it just took the pressure off and allowed us to probably enjoy it that wee bit more.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I would only be able to send one of them to a group and the rest couldn't go but...at that point we could send two of them so you could cover two groups...it's made a great impact on the kids.” (Multiple payment recipient)

It was common for respondents to say that without the BSG they would not have been able to afford these kinds of social activities with their children. Parents and carers thought that they would have still gone on familial outings, but they would have tended to be closer to home and preferably without cost.

“Oh, there would probably have been a lot less - not necessarily fun times - but I wouldn't have been able to do what they like. So the trampolining, the swimming, going to the big parks and stuff, because I would have needed to have used all my money to focus on getting the uniform, or just making sure there was the bare minimum in the house throughout the summer.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“Definitely not! My money is really tight as it is so I have to make sure that I'm budgeting really well and if I need a day out or...I need to plan for it a few weeks in advance because it's just not an option. So...it was really nice just to be able to...it was his very first time going to [country park] so...it was just really nice to be able to have that money there to just make the most of it.” (EL Payment recipient)

#### **3.4.4 Educational opportunities**

In addition to enabling families to take part in social opportunities, the BSG was perceived as allowing a number of children and families to take part in educational opportunities. For some, this involved using the grant to pay for educational days out to museums, while others used the grant to purchase educational toys and items that could be used at home. Respondents reported that the educational items bought to be used at home had helped their children's development.

“I think it's brought the little one on a lot more because it has been things that she has needed. When she first came, she couldn't really talk, but now she can count to ten. She can say all her colours. She's like came [sic] on a lot, and a lot of that was due to the things that we have got with the money, so it helped a lot.” (EL Payment recipient)

“Well, the impact on, the books had on [name of son] is amazing. His speech and everything, he's really advanced. He's really switched on for his age, so I know that everything that I bought him and do buy him, it really does affect him and his development and stuff. Obviously, having clothes on his back and shoes on his feet is a plus! He needs that. That's essential to his life, so everything that I got him has affected him in a good way.” (EL Payment recipient)

“It had a great impact because it managed to help her to learn to count so it did, it helped her come on in leaps and bounds. If I did'nae manage to get that she wouldn't have managed to get half the stuff she got. So it helped her a great amount so it did.” (Multiple payment recipient)

### **3.5 Views on Improvements to the Best Start Grant**

#### **3.5.1 Positive aspects of the Best Start Grant**

The BSG was overwhelmingly well received by respondents and, as outlined in section 3.2, there was a lot that was said to have worked well. The straightforward format of the application form, the option to link to other applications to evidence eligibility for the grant, confirmation texts and letters, the speed of the application process, and supportive call handlers were all mentioned as features of the grant process that worked well. The BSG was so well received by respondents that they were unanimous that, if eligible, they would apply for another payment in the future and would recommend the grant to others.

The financial help provided by the grant was the main reason why respondents would both apply for a grant in the future and advise other parents and carers to apply too. Respondents reiterated that in their experience the grant helped to ease the “financial pressure” of providing for children at key transitional stages and therefore could benefit other families.

“If you've got the opportunity to do it, apply for it because it really, really does help. It will take a lot of stress and pressure off of you, without having to worry about paying it back either, which is really helpful.” (P&B Payment recipient)

“If I qualified for one yes...that kind of payment would help to buy that stuff in bulk that I need. It's not going to happen any other time really...if I knew that that support was going to come my way again yeah I would. As I said it helped me in a million ways.” (EL Payment recipient)

A number of respondents mentioned their intention to apply for another payment, particularly the School Age Payment, in the future. Respondents reiterated that the payment would help with the cost of school uniforms, particularly for those who are not eligible for a School Clothing Grant.

“The School Age one, I think that's a really good thing because school uniform costs a fortune and obviously, all children need it. It's a really good thing to provide to parents.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“Currently with the two boys I’m probably around £400 for uniform...it costs a lot so it would definitely be handy to take the edge off.” (EL Payment recipient)

There were respondents who raised that applying for benefits can feel stigmatising but they did not have this experience when applying for and using the BSG. The grant was seen as an acceptable form of support which would encourage respondents to apply again.

“There’s no stigma or embarrassment or anything attached to it and it gives you the freedom to have peace of mind to know that your kid’s got something that they need that you maybe couldn’t have got them otherwise.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I think it sort of made me see that I was entitled to a wee bit of help and that no’ everything had to be a struggle...So it made me feel, it did’nae make me feel guilty, do you know what I mean, that I had to ask for help...So it removed that slightly and made me feel better and that I had something like that, that I did’nae feel like I owed anybody...it kind of made me feel better as a person. And that’s a big impact.” (SA Payment recipient)

The ease of the BSG application process was another reason respondents said that they would consider applying for the grant again in the future and recommending the grant to other eligible parents and carers. Indeed, a number of respondents had already told other parents and carers about the BSG, either by sharing the link to BSG information online, describing their experiences of applying for the grant or helping others with the application process.

“Oh definitely yeah!...I would just tell them it was straightforward, simple, it relieves a lot of stress from the household, yeah a lot.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“It was just easy to do. I’d quite happily recommend it to others to try and apply because it helps out a lot.” (Multiple payment recipient)

### **3.5.2 Suggested improvements for the Best Start Grant**

Respondents were asked whether there was anything that could improve the BSG. As the BSG was well received, it was common for respondents to say there was nothing about the grant that needed improving. Respondents found the process straightforward and appreciated the freedom to choose what they could spend the grant on.

“I just thought the whole thing was very good and straightforward and easy to apply for, so there’s nothing that I’d really change about it, because it was really easy for me.” (EL Payment recipient)

“I think everything was just brilliant, it was just an easy process and everything went smoothly. There were no complications or anything that went wrong.” (EL Payment recipient)

“I wouldn’t say anything really needed changed. It’s good that they’ve brought it into place because it does help people like me that don’t get a high income.”  
(Multiple payment recipient)

While the experience of applying for and using the BSG was overwhelmingly positive, there were respondents who thought it could be improved. Suggestions to improve the grant centred around two broad themes; the application process and promotion of the grant.

## **Grant application process**

### Application form

Overall, respondents found the grant application form straightforward to complete. There were respondents who were assisted by money advice service or job centre staff to fill in the application which was well received, and it was argued that others could benefit from the same support. It was also suggested that those with literacy issues or for whom English is a second language could benefit from additional support.

“I found it very straightforward but as I say possibly for other vulnerable people they find it a little bit more difficult i.e. I’ve got a Polish friend, she kind of struggles a wee bit sometimes with filling in forms and stuff like that. So maybe if there was somebody that could help people like that you know?” (Multiple payment recipient)

A number of respondents had received BSG payments for more than one eligible child, and some of this group had to apply twice in a short period of time to fit in with the application timelines. It was suggested that the application process could be streamlined if a second application was due imminently to allow only one application to take place, especially if the recipients’ circumstances were not due to change. Other suggested modifications to the application form included a setting/menu option to say which child you are applying for and specifying the type of BSG, and the online application being formatted to be more compatible for mobile phone screens.

“The adjustments would be not having to do it multiple times for different children. Whether that could be I’m applying now for this child and I’m giving you the information for another one that isn’t actually going to qualify for another couple of months but once they do qualify you can process it with the information I’ve already given you, or similar things like that. The family aspect of having several young children being able to do it for multiple children would be helpful.”  
(Multiple payment recipient)

“I think the most challenging thing was trying to do it through a phone...I’d advise anybody that’s applying for it if you’ve got a laptop, a tablet, or an iPad do it through there. I think it needed to be a bigger screen...Some questions you had to zoom in on to make sure you were getting it right.” (EL Payment recipient)

## Communication regarding the grant

Respondents commonly stated that applying for and receiving the BSG was a relatively quick process. However, there were respondents who said that receiving the grant took longer than advertised. These respondents had to call the helpline, to be informed that their applications were taking longer to be processed due to a higher number of people applying for the grant at a particular time (i.e. due to a new payment being launched or during the Christmas holidays). Respondents said that either better communication about any delays to an application or implementing a tracking system in order that individuals can check on progress of applications would improve the process. Another suggested improvement was to designate specific call handlers for each BSG payment type at times of high demand, or when a new BSG payment was coming into force.

“I would say to communicate that there’s a bit of busier period, you might be waiting a bit longer but not to be worried sort of thing.” (P&B Payment recipient)

“It would have been good if they put on a tracking system, like...given you a number and said you can track where the application is in the process...’cause that would have helped me out a lot.” (EL Payment recipient)

“They were telling me typically a couple of weeks you waited. I waited almost seven weeks because they had a high volume of calls regarding these other two [grant payments] that they had started...even if they designated some call handlers that they were specifically grants that had already been applied for, and another call handler could have maybe answered people's queries and stuff, and sorted it out so that we were all getting, you know, they were able to stick to timelines and stuff...seven weeks is a long, long time when you're kind of depending on that money.” (Multiple payment recipient)

Respondents also suggested that the provision of a greater choice to applicants regarding how they might communicate or receive communication about their application process might improve the current system. For example, it was perceived that the introduction of a live chat function online might be useful, in recognition that some people may not feel comfortable speaking on the phone. Others would have liked the option to choose the format in which to receive communication regarding the grant, with some expressing a preference for letters, whereas others favoured emails.

“It could maybe be a live chat to get an update of your application rather than have it by phone.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I like emails for most things so that’s quite a helpful way for me and it’s also a good record for me to go back and look at later.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“Email probably because I don’t like getting letters, I check my emails more than I do letters because if it’s a letter it can easily get lost. Like my wee one, he...if I

get a letter he'll take it off...he'll take it from the floor and do god knows what with it." (EL Payment recipient)

### Receiving the grant

While there were respondents who liked getting the payment in one lump sum (particularly in order to purchase more expensive items), there were others who argued that an option to receive the payment in instalments would improve the grant process for them as it would help them with household budgeting.

"I would maybe think about doing it in dribs and drabs like instead of just the full £250...like maybe one month £50 or £100 do you know what I mean and kind of...especially people that are on Universal Credit, when they get such a big sum like that half of us just go out and spend it all." (Multiple payment recipient)

"I think if you're a good budgeter then it's good to get it [the payment] all at once. Some folk maybe ain't a good budgeter so...it could maybe be an option, make it an option whether you want it as all in one or make it an option that you have it, get it spread out." (SA Payment recipient)

### Value of payment

On the whole, respondents thought that the value of each of the BSG payments was a reasonable amount to purchase what they needed for the child at a particular transitional stage. However, there were respondents who said the grant did not cover everything they needed at a particular key stage, particularly for the Pregnancy and Baby Payment if it was for a second or subsequent child, and thus worth £300 as opposed to £600 for the first child. Indeed, a suggested modification was for an individual's first successful Pregnancy and Baby Payment to be worth £600, even if it was not for the first child.

"You can get a lot for it, for that amount of money. So it is a good...it is a good amount of money that you get. It helps and it goes a long way so I would say it's a perfect amount." (SA Payment recipient)

"The majority of the money was used on the larger items such as a cot, a pram, the baby feeding...there was not enough because the pram had come up to £200, the cot was like £250 so I think there just wasn't enough money to get all the items that I needed." (P&B Payment recipient)

One respondent stated that a larger grant during lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic would have been beneficial, as families were having to do more to look after and entertain children at home.

"I wish it would have been a bit more money because if it was like three hundred quid it would have been enough to get him...because there was news of the coronavirus but no one thought it was going to be that bad. So I would have thought okay if we're going to be in lockdown I may as well keep him in the flat

and get him more stuff but get him outdoor stuff and put it inside.” (EL Payment recipient)

### Eligibility

Respondents recognised that the BSG is not eligible for all parents and carers and there was also an expressed misconception that those in employment are not eligible to apply. Respondents felt that having a child can be financially challenging and therefore all families of young children could benefit from receiving the grant.

“I know that people that work don’t get it, but I think that they should, because it’s just as dear to have a child when you’re working as when you’re not as well, if that makes sense. I know people that have not got any support at all, whereas I’m on benefits and I’ve got support, but they just struggle as much...I think it should just be for all children to have this start in life really, rather than just some people.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“I think it’s just really helpful for...for everyone really but I think...I know there are lots of young parents and things, I think it’s a really helpful thing for young parents who are maybe not earning as much as like a middle aged parent or something.” (P&B Payment recipient)

### **Promotion of the grant**

The consensus of the respondents was that the BSG was not yet widely known about and they had been relatively fortunate to hear about the grant at all. Respondents agreed that one way to improve the grant would be to promote and advertise it more widely.

“I don't know if it's very well advertised; I think there's actually quite a lot of people out there who don't know about these grants, therefore don't apply.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“It’s just I would just have been a bit concerned that I wouldn’t have known about it unless I was at work because I didn’t see it like on any social media or anything...I wouldn’t have known about it any other way, I don’t think. Because I don’t have any contact with like a Health Visitor any more...if it was on social media then more people would know about it kind of thing.” (EL Payment recipient)

“I don’t think it was advertised to the group that needed to see it.” (SA Payment recipient)

Respondents suggested that the BSG should be advertised in a range of different places to ensure that eligible individuals are aware of the grant. These suggestions included:

- BSG posters and information in nurseries, libraries, doctor surgeries and shops
- BSG promoted in the Birth to Five book given to new parents

- BSG adverts on buses, billboards and TV
- Greater promotion of the grant on social media.

“They should put the information out a bit more, its new but not many people actually know about it...you only know about it through your health visitor or if you go on the MyGov website that’s it. They don’t really put up in doctors surgeries, or...some health visitors will say it to you, some of them won’t...Yeah like even just putting it on TV for a bit.” (EL Payment recipient)

“The government is fantastic, the Health Visitors and midwives are really, really great, they give you loads of packs with information on everything you could ever think of. They give you a huge big book [Birth to Five] on how to look after a baby. So maybe a wee something in there about it...maybe there was and I just didn’t see it but, yeah it was kind of word of mouth I heard about it as opposed to it being openly available knowledge if that makes sense?” (P&B Payment recipient)

While some respondents did become aware of BSG from health professionals and support organisations, this did not appear to be implemented consistently. Respondents thought more could be done to ensure relevant professionals and organisations were informed about the BSG so that they could consistently promote it to parents and carers. The need for greater promotion to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities was specifically mentioned and organisations working within BME communities were seen as one possible way of facilitating greater awareness of the BSG. One way in which this could be accomplished was if the BSG was included in relevant professional training to increase awareness and promotion of the grant.

“I met [someone] when I was at Home Start one day...she was getting support from many different groups but not one of them had told her about the Best Start Grant...Make sure that it’s in the [staff] training because these are basics that help families enormously. That’s the main thing that people need is money...you know that’s going to help their well-being first and foremost is letting them know exactly what they’re entitled to.” (Multiple payment recipient)

“Maybe make the health visitors, those type of professionals, aware so that they can maybe advise some of their patients because at this point I still see my health visitor for [name of son]. All children see them until obviously they’re a bit older so that’s one way they could, I could have been made aware of it.” (EL Payment recipient)

“I think a lot of people don’t know but you know word of mouth, someone has told you...but it’s still not getting in the community centres in the neighbourhood...so more awareness in your BME communities, so we’re hard to reach and deprivation and poverty is an issue, but local community sources of charitable organisations working within these communities who can raise awareness of this grant do you know, signpost us.” (P&B Payment recipient)

## Communicating eligibility

Respondents reported that a key part of promoting the BSG would be to communicate clearly the grant eligibility criteria. There were respondents who assumed they would not be eligible for the grant because they or their partner were in employment, whereas others were reluctant to apply lest it may impact on their eligibility for other benefits. While it was said that there is clear information regarding eligibility criteria for the BSG online, respondents also argued that this should also be addressed when promoting the grant.

“Sometimes people are a bit worried like, ‘oh no what if it affects my benefits?’...Just broadcasting it a lot more would be more beneficial I think, it would help a lot more people.” (EL Payment recipient)

“I didn’t apply until after she was born because I just thought I’ll not get it. Because you do kind of think ‘och no I’m not going to, I’ll never get that’ and luckily when the baby was born I spoke to my friends a wee bit more and I was like ‘do you know what. I will’. What’s the harm. You pay your taxes all your life and work really hard so why shouldn’t you get something back?” (P&B Payment recipient)

“I think that was just a challenge to understand if you're in the receipt of any benefits that entitle you to it.” (P&B Payment recipient)

There were respondents who perceived that the government should contact every eligible parent and carer, rather than expecting parents and carers to find out about the grant themselves. As eligibility for the grant is dependent on being in receipt of certain benefits and tax credits, respondents thought that potential recipients of the grant could be identified and contacted. This was thought to be particularly important for families eligible for the Early Learning or School Age Payments as these families may be less likely to be in contact with professionals or organisations that could inform them about the grant.

“I just think that it's not really something that you would know about unless you were in a social or mothers' group or had friends that also have children. That's how I found out about it...Maybe sending a letter out to houses or saying that there is this opportunity for this grant that helps.” (EL Payment recipient)

“I don't know if there's even anything that Universal Credit could highlight here...When you apply for these things, you have to give children's ages. I don't know whether it's something that they could maybe look into, if they leave a journal note, 'Did you know your child such-and-such is almost of an age of the Best Start Grant'. Because if you're on Universal Credit then you qualify. So maybe if they could do something, almost a link or something, and then people are aware of these things.” (Multiple payment recipient)

## 4 Discussion

The discussion will seek to address the key questions outlined in the original invitation to tender document, as well as summarise key findings, propose potential modifications, describe the strengths and limitations of the study before the conclusions and implications of the study are considered.

### 4.1 Summary

It is important to recognise that the BSG was very well-received by the respondents in this study. The BSG recipients who participated in the study on the whole perceived that the application process was straightforward, they appreciated the grant payment and what it allowed them to do at key stages in their children's life, they did not view the BSG as stigmatising and they intended to apply for BSG payments again, if possible, or to recommend the grant to other parents and carers. Due to BSG's overwhelmingly positive response, interviewees did not always find it easy to suggest changes to its operation in the future. In addition, it was difficult to investigate differences in response by key respondent characteristics, given that there was very little variation in the views expressed by participant groups. Any changes to BSG that were proposed tended to be relatively minor, and suggest that modest, incremental modifications are considered in the future, as opposed to a radical overhaul of the entire benefit.

### 4.2 Research Questions

#### **The application process**

There was no research question in the Scottish Government's invitation to tender related to the BSG application process, or indeed its promotion. However, the few proposed modifications of the current way the BSG operates relates to these areas. Respondents believed that more could be done to promote the BSG more widely. They gave examples of individuals they knew who were eligible for the payment, but were unaware of the BSG. It was also reported that BSG recipients were lucky as some health and social care professionals were knowledgeable and had shared the information about the BSG, whereas others did not appear to be aware of its existence. There were some minor criticisms of the application process, with suggestions that delays in payment should be communicated to claimants, the application form may be challenging for those with literacy issues and the process might be streamlined to allow applicants to apply in advance for a second BSG payment where it would prevent two separate claims for BSG payment types for the same family to happen in a short space of time. However, these were not voiced by respondents as requiring urgent action, these were suggestions for consideration if the BSG continues to run in the longer term.

#### **To what extent and in what ways have BSG payments impacted on the household finances of recipients at critical transition points in their child's life?**

The respondents reported a positive impact of the BSG on the household finances at the key transitional stages (birth, toddlerhood, preparing for school) of their

child's life, when it was reported there was a greater financial strain. The parents and carers appreciated the greater financial freedom it afforded them in terms of what they could purchase and when, and in a number of cases it was said that it stopped them going into debt. The respondents also spoke positively of three payments available at different stages of the early years of their child, and that the BSG was not dependent or restricted on the size of the family. There was also evidence of a longer-term impact on household finances, as some purchases were made with future planning in mind, for example, children's clothes in larger sizes, developmental toys and larger beds. In a minority of cases, the payment had also been used to set up bank accounts. There was no evidence of there being any variation in the perceived impact of the BSG on household finances by family characteristics.

Only one minor change was suggested. Claimants proposed that the first Pregnancy and Baby Payment a family receives should be £600, even if it not the family's first child.

**To what extent and in what ways have the goods or services families bought with their BSG payments, and their reasons for choosing these goods or services, varied by family circumstances/ characteristics?**

There was no real evidence of there being any variation in what the respondents were purchasing with the BSG, or their reasons for doing so, by family circumstances or characteristics. The parents and carers tended to report using all or most of the grant to buy what were deemed to be a range of essential items for their children at the key transitional stages. Those who had not used all of the grant in one go stated that they used the remaining money on the payment of items for the household, household bills and social activities. However, this did not seem to vary by, for example, familial employment status, single versus dual parent households and number of children in the household.

**To what extent and in what ways have BSG payments enabled children to participate in social and/or educational opportunities available where they live?**

As might have been expected, the BSG being used to fund social activities for the family did not tend to be the primary purpose of the grant, according to respondents. However, social activities did appear to be a relatively common use of the grant, especially when utilising remaining grant funds after essential items had been bought. These events tended to be one-off events for the family, for example, to visit amusement or leisure parks, and were viewed as creating positive memories for the family unit. Without the BSG it was reported that these social events would not have happened, though the parents and carers may have sought out cost-free local parks.

There was also evidence of the BSG purchasing a series of activities for the child, such as swimming lessons.

Although there was not a strict delineation expressed between social and educational activities, it did appear as if educational outings (e.g. trips to museums)

and purchases (educational/developmental toys) were less frequently purchased overall, though if they were they tended to be the main BSG grant purchase.

### **To what extent and in what ways have BSG payments impacted on recipient families' experience of stress and anxiety?**

There was evidence in this evaluation that the BSG relieved the financial stress and anxiety in the parents and carers who received it. It has already been stated that individuals admitted that they would have experienced debt without access to the BSG. The respondents agreed that the key transitional stages of a child's life could be stressful times, not only because of the financial implications for the family. However, the fact that they were able to buy essential items at these key times, such as for a new-born baby, or nursery and school uniforms, resulted in the parents and carers feeling as if they had prepared for these key stages, and were providing for their children. Respondents added that this feeling of preparedness and provision for the family boosted their own self-esteem and gave them confidence as a parent, as it showed that they were capable of providing for their family and were not reliant on, for example, donations from others. Related to this is the fact that the respondents did not view receiving the BSG as being stigmatising in any way – they viewed the payment as their own entitlement which also allowed them the freedom to spend the grant in a way they thought was most appropriate. As purchases were made with future planning in mind, such as beds suitable for older children, and parents also set up bank accounts for children, it is likely that the BSG was alleviating stress and anxiety for some over a longer time period, and not solely at the time of purchase of essential items.

### **To what extent and in what ways have BSG payments led to families making behavioural changes that are known to increase health and well-being (e.g. healthy food choices, participating in sport and exercise)?**

In the relatively early stages of the operation of the BSG, there was little evidence of the grant leading to behavioural changes that might benefit health. The grant was used by some parents and carers to purchase clothing and footwear to facilitate outdoor play. Similarly, it has been noted that swimming lessons had been bought for the child using the BSG. It is difficult to conclude from these examples, though, that there has been an increase in physical activity in the children or their families as a result of receiving the BSG. Best Start Foods was not a part of this evaluation, and similarly there is little evidence from this current study of a change in dietary practices. It might be argued, though, that the social and educational activities enjoyed by the children and families alike, frequently cited as creating memories for the future, are likely to impact favourably on mental well-being.

## **4.3 Strengths and limitations**

There were a number of strengths and limitations associated with this evaluation. The key ones were:

### **Sampling/recruitment**

- In the absence of the preferred sampling frame, recruitment was facilitated by the promotion of the research via national and local organisations and groups

who provide support to and/or are in contact with parents and carers in Scotland. This recruitment approach can give the research credibility in the eyes of their members, resulting in them being more willing to participate. Where organisations agree to assist in setting up interviews, it can also provide an opportunity to sample on a number of different criteria. There are also many such groups across Scotland, often catering for different interests (e.g., fathers, kinship carers, single parents, and families where parents and/or children live with disabilities), which allows for a diverse sample to be obtained.

- In total, over 70 national and local organisations and groups were approached to support the recruitment for this study, and the research team augmented this recruitment approach through promotion via Facebook and Twitter. This approach resulted in the successful recruitment of a wide range of parents and carers in terms of age, household composition, geographical area and employment status.
- Despite approaching relevant organisations and using social media only one male respondent was interviewed and only two kinship carers took part. However, Scottish Social Security data on BSG and Best Start Foods recipients state that the vast majority of BSG claimants are female and are parents (as opposed to kinship carers).
- It is also possible that those who choose to participate in such studies are more likely to have had a positive experience, though it could be argued that those with more polarised views are more likely to participate. If it had been possible to interview claimants whose applications had been unsuccessful this may have given a different perspective on the BSG application process. The evaluation focused on those who had applied for and used the grant in order to assess the experience and impacts of payments.

## Findings

- The qualitative research was able to give great insight into the views of a range of BSG recipients in relation to the grant; its promotion, application process, use, perceived impact and ways it might be changed in the future. However, it is unable to demonstrate how prevalent these views are across Scotland, which would require a nationally representative quantitative survey (which in turn could not elicit the depth of response of qualitative interviews). As such, it is unwise to generalise the findings from this evaluation to the whole BSG client base, though the consensus reached from a range of respondents across Scotland adds confidence to the results.
- The Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on the research methodology. The first interview was conducted face-to-face prior to lockdown. After lockdown, interviews were postponed and the national and local organisations the research team were using to recruit participants were initially largely unresponsive as they adjusted their ways of working. However, it was relatively straightforward to conduct interviews by telephone during lockdown, and respondents appeared to enjoy the opportunity to give their views in this way. In addition, the interviewees were able to recall their experience of the

BSG prior to lockdown, and were able to separate the impact of the pandemic on their lives in their accounts of the grant.

## 5 Conclusions

The Best Start Grant (BSG) was perceived very positively by the respondents in this evaluation. The consensus was that the BSG application process was straightforward, the use of the grant led to positive outcomes for child and parent alike, it was not stigmatising to receive the payment and the BSG should be promoted in order that all eligible individuals apply for it. Importantly, the BSG was perceived as easing financial strain on low income families at key transitional stages for their children, and prevented some from families from going into debt. As the respondents saw BSG as an entitlement and not as a donation, it allowed them to spend it appropriately, increasing their confidence as parents and carers. As a result of the very positive reception for the BSG, any proposed modifications were relatively minor. This suggests that the BSG is already operating smoothly and successfully across Scotland, and only relatively minor changes should be considered in the near future.

Assuming that the BSG continues to operate in Scotland, this research identified the following issues that can be considered in future developments of the benefit.

- Further promotion of the grant may be required to ensure that all eligible families are aware of the BSG, as there was evidence that not all potential claimants, and indeed not all relevant health and social care professionals, had heard of it. Targeted promotion to specific groups of parents and carers may need to be considered, for example, via kinship carer, Black and Minority Ethnic family and single father support groups. Also, it is possible that those eligible for the Early Learning and/or School Age payments may no longer be in contact with organisations or professionals that can inform them of the grant.
- The potential for the first Pregnancy and Baby Payment for a family to be £600, even if is not for the first child.
- Aspects of communication for BSG applicants may need to be reviewed:
  - Literacy issues: the current application form and process may be challenging for those with issues in reading and writing, as well as those who have English as a second language, though there is support (e.g. telephone helplines) currently available to assist with this.
  - Claimants may need to be informed if there are delays in receiving the BSG.
  - There may be potential to streamline the process for those making multiple applications for different children within a specified time period.
  - The possibility of features such an online live chat function and forms suitable for mobile phones to assist applicants.

Future research should also be considered. A quantitative survey of BSG recipients would enable the Scottish Government to examine the longer-term impact of BSG across Scotland, with follow-up qualitative research to augment this through the

further exploration of the views of key respondent types, including those who applied unsuccessfully for the grant.

# Appendix A - Project Information Sheet



## Evaluation of the Best Start Grant Information Sheet

Hello! We work for an organisation called ScotCen Social Research. We would like to talk to you about your experience of receiving a Best Start Grant (BSG).

### Why is this research being carried out?



Over the last year the Scottish Government started offering the Best Start Grant to parents and carers<sup>a</sup> with young children who are in receipt of certain benefits or tax credits<sup>b</sup>. The Best Start Grant has three payments:

- Pregnancy and baby payment
- Early years payment
- School age payment

As this is the first year this grant has been available, the Scottish Government would like to understand what recipients have used their grant for and what impact the grant has had. Best Start Foods is not being covered in this evaluation. To ensure that the research is independent, the Scottish Government has funded ScotCen to undertake this research.

### Who is carrying out this research?



ScotCen has been commissioned by the Scottish Government to carry out this research. ScotCen is an integral part of NatCen Social Research, Britain's leading centre for independent social research. We have no political affiliations or shareholders and have an international reputation for delivering high quality research.

### Why have you chosen me?

As a person in receipt of a BSG payment we believe you could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the grant and share your experiences of it.

### Why should I take part?

Sharing your views on the effectiveness of the BSG may help improve the service. Taking part is completely voluntary, but we do hope you will get involved.

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<sup>a</sup> BSG cannot be applied for a child if they're in residential care or foster care. This is because it's the role of your local council to provide support.

<sup>b</sup> Parents under 18 years old and 18/19 year old parents who are dependent on someone else, do not have to be on a qualifying benefit.

## What will taking part involve?



You are being asked to take part in an interview conducted by a trained ScotCen researcher. The interview will last 45-60 minutes. The interview would take place over the phone.

With your permission, the discussion will be audio recorded using encrypted recorders, safely stored and transcribed to help us with the analysis. Only the research team will have access to the recording and the transcript.

### **Everyone who takes part in an interview will receive a £30 Love2Shop voucher.**

Taking part is voluntary, and you won't have to answer any questions you do not want to. You can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. There will be no consequences if you chose not to participate.

If you would like to take part in an interview, all you need to do is contact [named staff members] (details below). Please note, that we may not be able to interview everyone who expresses an interest in taking part in an interview.

## Is the interview confidential?



Yes. We will treat information you give us in the strictest confidence under the Data Protection Act 2018 and the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The results collected are used for research purposes only and no one will be able to identify you in any way.

## What will happen to any information I give?

We will use information collected from this research to write a report for the Scottish Government. The information you provide will be treated confidentially and used only for the purpose of the research described above and will be securely deleted after the completion of the study. The research team will not pass your personal details to anybody without your permission. No information that would make a person identifiable will be passed on to the Scottish Government.

## What next?



If you are able to take part in an interview or you have any questions, all you need to do is contact:

Email: <details removed>

Tel: <details removed>

Address: ScotCen, Scotiabank House, 6 South Charlotte Street, Edinburgh, EH2 4AW

# Appendix B Project Privacy Notice



## Evaluation of the Best Start Grant Privacy Notice

### About the project



Over the last year the Scottish Government started offering the Best Start Grant to parents or carers<sup>c</sup> with young children who are in receipt of certain benefits or tax credits<sup>d</sup>. The Best Start Grant has three payments:

- Pregnancy and baby payment
- Early years payment
- School age payment

As this is the first year this grant has been available, the Scottish Government would like to understand what people have used their grant for and what impact the grant has had. To ensure the research is independent, the Scottish Government has funded ScotCen Social Research to do this.

### About this privacy notice



This privacy notice explains how your personal data (e.g. any information that could identify you such as gender and age) collected for the purposes of this research are used and handled.

The Scottish Government is the “data controller” which means that they decide what personal data is collected from you as part of this research.

ScotCen Social Research is the “data processor” for this research, which means that ScotCen will be responsible for collecting information from you during an interview, securely storing it and using it to write a report on behalf of the Scottish Government.

The legal basis for collecting this information is ‘public task’ which means it is being collected to aid the functioning of government.

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<sup>c</sup> BSG cannot be applied for a child if they’re in residential care or foster care. This is because it’s the role of your local council to provide support.

<sup>d</sup> Parents under 18 years old and 18/19 year old parents who are dependent on someone else, do not have to be on a qualifying benefit.

## How we got your details

ScotCen asked organisations that are in contact with parents to advertise this research.

You are receiving this information because you have shown an interest in taking part in an interview about your experience of receiving a Best Start Grant.

## What happens to the information you provide



We will use information collected from interviews to write a report for the Scottish Government. We will not publish anything that can reveal your identity. The information is used for research purposes only and is dealt with in accordance with data protection legislation.

Your name and any personal data (such as gender and age) will be stored securely. ScotCen will not pass your personal details to anybody without your permission. No information that could make a person identifiable will be passed on to the Scottish Government. Only the research team will have access to your personal data.

## How long your information is stored for



All personal data and interview responses are stored securely and confidentially under the terms of data protection and in line with international best practice and NatCen's ISO27001, ISO 20252 and Cyber Essentials Plus certifications. The interview recordings and transcripts, and any respondent personal data, will be stored by ScotCen Social Research for 6 months after the end of the project. They will then be securely destroyed.

## Your rights

Taking part in an interview is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without consequence, and you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to.

Data protection legislation gives rights to individuals in respect of the personal data that organisations hold about them. These include the right to:

- access a copy of the information an organisation holds about them;
- object to processing that is likely to cause or is causing damage or distress;
- prevent processing for direct marketing;
- have inaccurate personal data rectified, blocked, erased or destroyed in certain circumstances; and
- claim compensation for damages caused by a breach of the legislation.

If you have questions about your personal data held by the data controller you can contact the Data Protection Officer at the Scottish Government, <name removed>: (Email: [DataProtectionOfficer@gov.scot](mailto:DataProtectionOfficer@gov.scot), Address: Victoria Quay, Commercial Street, Edinburgh, EH6 6QQ)

## We guard your privacy



We will treat the information you give us in the strictest confidence under the Data Protection Act 2018 and the European Union General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

No one looking at the findings in the report will be able to identify you in any way. You will never receive any junk mail as a result of speaking to us. We never pass on your details to other organisations for commercial purposes.

At ScotCen we have a comprehensive set of policies and procedures which apply to all parts of NatCen Social Research, and alongside our ongoing programme of internal audits we undergo formal external audits annually to ensure we continue to meet all the requirements of ISO27001 and other international best practices.

## How to contact us



If you are able to take part in an interview or you have any questions, all you need to do is contact:

Email: <details removed>

Tel: <details removed>

Address: ScotCen, Scotiabank House, 6 South Charlotte Street, Edinburgh, EH2 4AW

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## Complaints



If you have questions or concerns about how your personal data are collected or used, or if you believe we have not complied with your data protection rights you can contact NatCen's Data Protection Officer by email at [dpo@natcen.ac.uk](mailto:dpo@natcen.ac.uk).

You also have the right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office. If you are unhappy with the way your personal data are being processed, you can report it to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) at <https://ico.org.uk/concerns> or by calling the ICO helpline on 0303 123 1113.

### **How to access background or source data**

The data collected for this social research publication:

- are available in more detail through Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics
- are available via an alternative route
- may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact [social\\_research@gov.scot](mailto:social_research@gov.scot) for further information.
- cannot be made available by Scottish Government for further analysis as Scottish Government is not the data controller.



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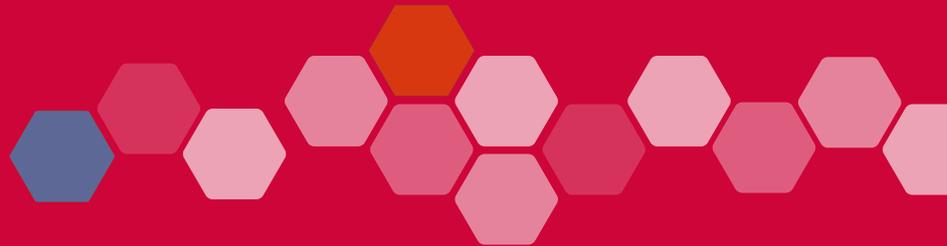
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