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# The Guardian

## Scotland united in curiosity as councils trial universal basic income

**Four local authorities tasked with turning utopian fantasy into reality with backing of first minister and multi-party support**



Universal basic income is, according to its many and various supporters, an idea whose time has come. The deceptively simple notion of offering every citizen a regular payment without means testing or requiring them to work for it has backers as disparate as Mark Zuckerberg, Stephen Hawking, Caroline Lucas and Richard Branson. Ed Miliband chose the concept to launch his ideas podcast *Reasons to be Cheerful* in the autumn.

But it is in Scotland that four councils face the task of turning basic income from a utopian fantasy to contemporary reality as they build the first pilot schemes in the UK, with the support of a £250,000 grant announced by the Scottish government last month and the explicit support of Nicola Sturgeon.

The concept of a universal basic income revolves around the idea of offering every individual, regardless of their existing benefit entitlement or earned income, a non-conditional flat-rate payment, with any income earned above that taxed progressively. The intention is to replace the welfare safety net with a platform on which people can build their lives, whether they choose to earn, learn, care or set up a business.

The idea has its roots in 16th-century humanist philosophy. The political theorist Thomas Paine advocated a citizen's dividend. But there has been a groundswell of interest over the past decade not only among lateral thinkers but also anti-poverty groups, which see it as a means of changing the relationship between people and state, and between workers and the gig economy.

In Scotland, a country wearily familiar with divisions of a constitutional nature, the concept of a basic income is almost unique in enjoying multi-party favour. Across the four areas currently designing basic income pilots - Glasgow, Edinburgh, Fife and North Ayrshire - the projects have variously been championed by Labour, SNP, Green and, in one case, Conservative councillors.

Matt Kerr, who has tirelessly lobbied for the idea through Glasgow city council, said: "Reactions to basic income have not split along the usual left/right party lines. Some people to the left of the Labour party think that it undermines the role of trade unions and others take the opposite view. But there should be room for scepticism; you need that to get the right policy."

Advocates are aware such unity of purpose is precious and worth preserving. "The danger is that this falls into party blocks," said Kerr. "If people can unite around having a curiosity about [it] then I'm happy with that. But having the first minister on board has done us no harm at all."

Inevitably, Sturgeon's declared interest has invited criticism from her opponents. A civil service briefing paper on basic income, which expressed concerns that the "conflicting and confusing" policy could be a disincentive to work and costed its national roll-out at £12.3bn a year, was obtained by the Scottish Conservatives through a freedom of information request in October. The party accused her of "pandering to the extreme left of the [independence] movement".



Thomas Paine. Photograph: Alamy

But advocates argue the figures fail to take into account savings the scheme would bring. The independent thinktank Reform Scotland, which published a briefing earlier this month setting out a suggested basic income of £5,200 for every adult, has calculated that much of the cost could be met through a combination of making work-related benefits obsolete and changes to the tax system, including scrapping the personal allowance and merging national insurance and income tax.

Sturgeon has remained committed to the pilots, telling a conference of international economists days after the critical briefing paper: "It might turn out not to be the answer, it might turn out not to be feasible. But as work and employment changes as rapidly as it is doing, I think its really important that we are prepared to be open-minded about the different ways that we can support individuals to participate fully in the new economy."



Sunset at Tayport, Fife, one of the council areas involved in the pilot schemes, the first in the UK. Photograph: Simon Powis/Alamy

The councils in question, which span a cross-section of urban and rural demographics, are studying feasibility as part of their broader anti-poverty work. Joe Cullinane, the Labour leader of North Ayrshire council, said: “We have high levels of deprivation and high unemployment, so we take the view that the current system is failing us and we need to look at something new to lift people out of poverty.

“Basic income has critics and supporters on the left and right, which tells you there are very different ways of shaping it and we need to state at the outset that this is a progressive change, to remove that fear and allow people to have greater control over their lives, to enter the labour market on their own terms.”

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Cullinane also noted that while the Scottish government has asked councils to bid for a £250,000 grant between them, his administration had already set aside £200,000 in its budget for a feasibility study.

Dave Dempsey, the leader of the Conservative group on Fife council, who joined forces with its independent poverty advisory group Fairer Fife Commission to promote a

potential pilot, the appeal revolves around the reduction of benefits bureaucracy. “I come from a maths and engineering background and there is an elegance to it,” he said.

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