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# The benefits of a universal approach

Christmas has been and gone, but there are more gifts to come for pregnant women in Scotland: 2017 sees the launch of a Finnish-style baby box scheme across the country. A 3-month pilot in Orkney and Clackmannanshire began on 1 January, and by the summer all babies born in Scotland will receive the box. Along with potentially contributing to a reduction in child mortality rates, the baby boxes contain useful items and educational tips to help parents bond with and care for their newborn.

When First Minister Nicola Sturgeon (2016) announced the initiative, she said it would be ‘a powerful symbol of our belief that all children should start life on a level playing field.’ All families in Scotland, regardless of socioeconomic status, will receive a baby box.

For many, this sounds like a welcome gift, but not all have embraced it. Writing in *The Scotsman*, columnist Jane Bradley (2017) has praised the scheme but suggested it should not be offered to all families. The initiative, she explains, is estimated to cost £6 million a year; she suggests this may be too high a price to pay at a time when council budgets are squeezed and the health service is struggling.

It is always difficult to agree on how best to spend public funds, especially in a slow economy. But it would be an error to simplify the baby box scheme as an outlay of £6 million a year for little return. The additional benefits conferred by the educational aspects of the initiative, with its links to antenatal and postnatal health care and community services, could lead to cost savings further down the line—although this is, of course, extremely difficult to quantify.

According to the Child Poverty Action Group (2016), more than one fifth of children in Scotland live in poverty. Bradley acknowledges that, for these children, the baby boxes could prove vital: ‘The bright playmat could be welcome stimulation... The book may be read over and over again... The safe

place to sleep could be a lifesaver.’ For the majority, though, she contends that ‘it seems to be an indulgent use of state cash’.

But what about middle-income families, who are not living in ‘poverty’ yet still struggle financially? The birth of a baby is an expensive time, and there are doubtless many families who do not meet official definitions of poverty but would benefit enormously from the baby box. The problem with any kind of means testing is that there are bound to be those who miss out by being just on the ‘wrong’ side of the line. Bradley suggests that the baby box scheme could offer ‘an opt-out for wealthier parents who feel the investment is wasted on them’—but this is exactly the kind of socioeconomic division the initiative is supposed to nullify.

Universal provision means no one is singled out or left behind. That some parents may see the baby box as a luxury they don’t really need should not detract from the point that, for others, it is crucial. This is a great example of state investment in families and the early years, and a sign that socioeconomic status should be irrelevant when it comes to giving babies the best start in life. **BJM**

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