



Creating Spaces for Children to Feel Seen and Heard: The Design and Use Space in the North Strathclyde Bairns Hoose

Dr. Eilidh Lamb

Funded by



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childrenfirst.org.uk | Support line 08000 28 22 33 | General enquiries 0131 446 2300

Registered Scottish Charity Number: SC016092

Introduction

The North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose represents a pioneering step for Scotland in providing a trauma-informed, child-friendly environment where children who are victims or witnesses of abuse can access justice, protection, health, and recovery services all under one roof. Since its opening in August 2023, the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose has been the subject of a realist evaluation by the University of Edinburgh (Mitchell et al., 2023, 2024, 2025) of which this PhD study is connected. This study has added to the evaluation by exploring how the emerging Bairns' Hoose model works in practice in North Strathclyde, and how its physical space and design affect children, young people, their non-abusing family members, and the professionals who support them.

This briefing focuses on a collaborative PhD research conducted Dr. Eilidh Lamb, based at the University of Edinburgh with Children First. This research briefing highlights findings about the Bairns' Hoose space: its design principles, how children and families experience it, how professionals work within it, and the operational changes that flow from it. This briefing discusses research findings from this study. Key insights from this work include:

- How the design has responded to priorities such as comfort, safety, and minimising re-traumatisation.
- The ways in which children and young people's perspectives and experiences have been embedded in the design process (for example through consultation and participatory input)
- The importance of a multiuse space to host and facilitate multiple services (e.g. joint investigative interviews, a remote court suite and recovery services) in a single, coordinated setting
- Reflections from children, young people, their family members, and practitioners on how the space feels—what works well and what challenges remain.

Understanding these findings is essential for practitioners working in or alongside the Bairns' Hoose. As the physical space and design of the Bairns Hoose are not just backdrops, but active components of how trauma, justice, and recovery are experienced. This briefing aims to highlight how space and design can enable better practice, better outcomes for children, and improved collaboration across partnerships and agencies. This briefing begins by outlining the background to this research study, including explaining what a Barnahus and Bairns' Hoose are and why they are important for children, young people and their non-abusing families' safety, justice and recovery after they experience or witness harm. This paper will then discuss the research study's aims, questions and methods used. The key findings from this research study will be presented followed by implications for policy and practice. The discussion will outline why these findings are important when developing models of working with children and across agencies in North Strathclyde and also within Children First as an organisation.

Background to the Research

Barnahus

Barnahus, translates to "Children's House," (in Icelandic) (Gudbrandsson, 2010) and is a model of collaboration where professionals work together to ensure the well-being and safety of children and young people who have experienced abuse, violence or neglect. Professionals who work in a Barnahus come from a range of disciplines and agencies related to children's protection and justice after the identification of abuse or harm. They include:

- Police officers (delivering the joint investigative interview)
- Social workers and child protection services
- Healthcare workers (including mental health and wellbeing)
- Crown prosecution and criminal justice services (like court)
- Recovery and advocacy workers
- Third sector and voluntary workers

Bairns' Hoose

The Scottish adaptation of this model is known as the Bairns' Hoose. The Scottish Bairns' Hoose Standards, published in 2023, outline Scotland's ambition to create integrated, trauma-informed, rights-based services that reduce the need for children to repeatedly retell traumatic experiences across multiple systems and locations. The North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose opened in 2023 and is Scotland's first operational Bairns' Hoose site. It supports children and young people from East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Inverclyde, and Renfrewshire (Mitchell et al., 2023, 2024).

The North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose space was developed collaboratively with Children First, local authorities, Police Scotland, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, and other multidisciplinary partners. The University of Edinburgh have been a learning partner in the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose since 2021. A central aim of the model is that professionals come to the child, rather than children, young people and families having to navigate multiple intimidating or unfamiliar environments such as police stations, hospitals, or court buildings.

The Bairns' Hoose models aim to be a national, transformational, and 'whole-system' approach to delivering child protection, justice, and health support and services to child victims and witnesses of abuse and harm in Scotland. Children First and the North Strathclyde Bairns Hoose partnership are one of 6 Bairns' Hoose 'Pathfinders' across Scotland with 4 more 'Affiliate' Bairns Hoose services being developed.

Research Aim

The aim of this research was to explore the design and use of space of the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose from the perspectives of children, young people, their families' and professionals who work there.

Research Methods

The time frame for this research study was between 2022-2025. Fieldwork activities took place between 2023-2024. I conducted two research groups with children and young people who were engaged with Children First and who were all supported by the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose Rights, Recovery and Advocacy team. All of the children and young people who took part in the research activities have experienced or witnessed harm or abuse and have undergone a Joint Investigative Interview (JII) about harm or abuse they have witnessed or experienced, in spaces used before the opening of the Bairns' Hoose in North Strathclyde.

- One research group met every 2 weeks for a period of 6 months. There were 3 children and young people aged 10-14 years old who took part in research activities in this research group. We used creative to explore the importance of safe spaces when reporting abuse, and how spaces like the Bairns' Hoose might be designed for other children and young people who will use these services.
- One research group met 4 times over a period of 4 months. There were 2 young people aged 18-20 who took part in research activities in this research group. These young people have directly participated in the design process for the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose (NSBH). These two young people also took part in the Children First 'Changemakers' group. We used photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1999) in focus groups to critically reflect on their experiences being involved in the NSBH design
- I conducted three focus groups with 15 professionals from multiple disciplines who have been involved in the design of the NSBH space and delivery of the NSBH model. Professions ranged from police, social work, third-sector, architects, interior designers and Children First colleagues.
- I conducted secondary data analysis of 36 interviews with professionals and 18 interviews with children, young people and their non-abusing family members. These research interviews were carried out by researchers from the University of Edinburgh as part of the North Strathclyde Bairns Hoose Phase 1 and Phase 2 (Mitchell et al., 2023, 2024, 2025).

Research Findings

1. The Need for New Spaces for Children and Young People's Safety, Justice and Recovery in North Strathclyde

Children and young people who took part in this research study had not used the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose for the purpose of a Joint Investigative Interview (JII) as it had not opened when they took part in this research study. As mentioned, the research participants in this study were reflecting on and commenting on their experiences of being interviewed in spaces like schools, police stations and police buildings. Children and young people discussed in this research that these spaces were not supportive or helpful for them when they were being interviewed. Research participants described their previous experiences of formal interview settings, police stations and courts, as places which felt intimidating, unfamiliar, and distressing. Many participants discussed how these institutional environments made them feel nervous, watched, or powerless during already difficult experiences of reporting harm or abuse. The way these spaces looked felt particularly challenging for all children and young people in this study. This was discussed by Yasmine, aged 20, who took part in a focus group. Yasmine explained how both the look and feeling of a police building she visited to undergo a JII made her feel. She explained that

"But I think because, obviously, I've done interviews in the actual traditional setting where they just put a camera in front of you. And it's in like, I think the last one I've done it in, it was a room, it was just a meeting room. So, there was tables and chairs and all that, and then there was like a window and you could hear like sirens and all that going by....it would be so much better with the way the windows are in the Bairns' Hoose, like glossed over and that... whereas in the town it's like, with no curtains do you know what I mean? And there's like no colours, no nothing, and it's just, it's not a very nice place to be in". (Yasmine, aged 20)

Similarly, Jordan, aged 16, who participated in an interview for this study, characterised the location where their Joint Investigative Interview (JII) took place as "scary," suggesting that the wider environment had started to shape their feelings and emotional experience before entering the interview itself. Jordan mentioned

"I think, like, when we went to the interview it was really far away from, like, all of civilisation. It was quite scary actually; just going into this random building to go and talk to some people you've got no clue about". (Jordan, aged 16).

Jordan's account is not dissimilar to other children and young people who participated in this study. This research has ultimately found that 'traditional' and institutional child protection and justice

environments (like police stations and courts) can contribute to secondary trauma for children and young people by:

- Requiring children, young people and non-abusing family members to move between multiple services and buildings in many different locations
- Increasing anxiety for these individuals through the feelings created through traditional, institutional design, unfamiliar environments and heightened security features that generated feelings of surveillance, rather than feelings of privacy
- Exposing children, young people and their non-abusing families to long delays and fragmented processes across different buildings and environments
- Creating a sense of fear for children and young people attending court around encountering perpetrators within court environments.

Children, young people and their family members described environments used before the opening of Bairns' Hoose as unfamiliar, upsetting, and uncomfortable, particularly when they lacked a sense of safety or security. Examples included the physical layout of buildings, the appearance of interview rooms, and the placement of equipment such as cameras. Instead of creating a supportive atmosphere; these features often increased participants' feelings of anxiety, fear, and vulnerability. In addition, the combination of different spaces, people, and information within child protection and justice systems can create a confusing and overwhelming experience. Exposure to court processes and delays may contribute to secondary trauma and increase distress for children, families, and professionals. However, participants also highlighted that these negative experiences are not inevitable or specific to child victims and witnesses. Professionals also discussed the impact of these spaces on their practice, and how they felt when doing their role. This was highlighted by one professional who is involved in the daily activities of the Bairns' Hoose, reflected on their work environments prior to the opening of the Bairns' Hoose space. Professional 22 noted that

"I mean, especially for us police, we're used to working in really, really dingy offices ...And used to having really horrible environments, working in police offices". (Professional 22).

Thus, a new approach to space and environment for child protection and justice processes is required. A new approach to designing and adopting child-centred and trauma-informed approaches in design and in practice, can support services to be redesigned to better meet the needs of children and young people. Creating safer, more welcoming, and supportive environments can help reduce harm, improve wellbeing, and ensure that investigative and legal processes are more responsive, respectful, and effective for those involved.

2. Becoming the Bairns' Hoose: Creating a Relational Space through Collaboration and Participation

2.1. Collaboration

Findings from this research demonstrate that the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose is shaped not only by its physical environment, but also by the relationships, values, and collaborative practices enacted within it. Participants consistently described strong leadership, shared ownership of the space, and multidisciplinary partnership working as fundamental to creating a relational, child-centred culture. The vision for the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose space was discussed as a collaborative and participatory approach, which was highlighted by Professional 49 who commented on the partnership developed through the vision for Bairns' Hoose.

"If we hadn't partnered with Children First, I don't think they have been precious about it at all.... because obviously we are interdependent because they can't deliver their Bairns' Hoose without the rest of us actually getting on board with it. So, we are interdependent. So, there hasn't been any feeling that, 'yeah, we got, we got the money so it's our house'. It's very much felt like a partnership and to me anyway that's. That's how I've felt about it. And you know quite a close partnership". (Professional 49).

The approaches described as one of 'partnership' and 'interdependence' fostered strategic vision for the implementation of the space and the design. Professional relationships benefitted from these approaches when they used the space and discussed improved communication, strengthened interagency relationships, and enhanced understanding of professional roles and responsibilities. This was described by Professional 8 as

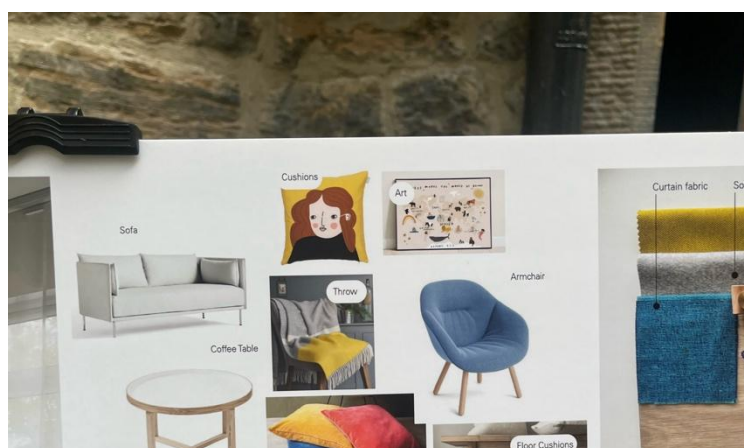
"I think if people know about the Bairns Hoose, it's a little bit easier, and if you've got a relationship with that person, it's a little bit easier. I think I'm hopeful for when the court is up and running, and then we've got a court person in the house, they will become part of our team as well. So, like, our knowledge of that, how it works, what power or control we have over that, I would hope will get better". (Professional 8)

2.2. Participation

Another important element of the design of the space relates to children and young people's participation in the design. This has emerged as a defining feature of the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose space. Their contributions to decisions regarding colour schemes, furnishings, sensory features, privacy, and the overall atmosphere, has helped to create an environment that reflects their needs, preferences, and experiences. This was discussed by Leyla, aged 18

"I think it's just like having the cameras up there [on the ceiling], like knowing that they're there, but you can't change that. I think, like, that room is kind of what it's meant to be. Like

when we came in, I was like, this is nice. Then I saw this one [camera on the ceiling] and I was like, oh, this is, this is what we wanted". (Leyla, 20).



These images are of the 1) mood boards created with young people in the Children First Changemakers group who also took part in this research and 2) the interior of the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose 'recovery room', evidencing young people's choices in the design of the space.

Another young person who took part in an interview explored how they might feel if they were to use the Bairns' Hoose space for a JII or court appearance. In a focus group, Noah, aged 14, explained that

"But it's like a home where you are, you're able to feel safe, and talk about your problems, and you know that you're talking to trusted people.... and I don't need to feel guilty about what I'm saying, or worried, or anxious. I just know, I can just talk, and I could just sit here and talk to a room with no one in it, and it feels more comfortable than sitting talking to my bedroom, if that makes sense". (Noah, aged 14).

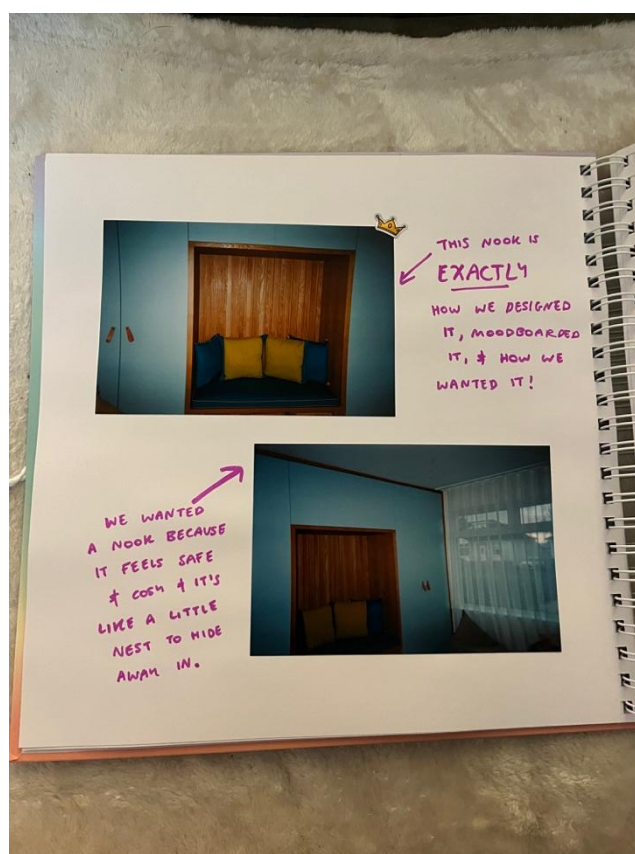
These findings suggest that trauma-informed design extends beyond the physical characteristics of a building. While the environment provides an important foundation, it is the interaction between space, relationships, and children and young people's participation that enables trauma-informed principles to be realised in practice. Children and young people's involvement was not an additional or optional element of service development; rather, it was central to creating a space that feels safe, welcoming, and responsive. The findings therefore identify three interrelated conditions that underpin the successful development of a trauma-informed Bairns' Hoose:

- (1) strong and visible leadership**
- (2) collaborative ownership and multidisciplinary partnership**
- (3) meaningful participation of children and young people in the design and ongoing development of the space.**

3. The Impact of Space on People: Finding Calm and Connection

Evidence from this study suggests that space functions as more than a physical setting; it actively shapes children's emotional, physical, and social experiences. Accordingly, the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose was described by the design team has been intentionally designed to reflect trauma-informed and child-centred principles, recognising the role that the built environment plays in promoting safety, comfort, participation, and recovery. One professional involved in the design of the space commented on these considerations of space's impact upon people, practices and the processes of the Bairns' Hoose model. Professional 3 noted that

"I think the focus was probably more trying to create a space that felt calm, that people, that there wasn't, you didn't feel you were walking into an institutional space. You felt you were coming somewhere that you could relax, to some extent, if I'm not wrong, but you didn't feel pressured..., it's about trying to keep children calm and trying to keep them in an environment that feels safe, feels secure and is calm prior to them going into the interview scenario" (Professional 3).



The image above is from a scrapbook created by two young people in this research study.

The image above photographs taken and input into the in the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose scrapbook created by young people who took part in this research. This work provides further evidence on how research participants, who took part in the design consultations about the space with Children First, felt about the design features. The above image discusses the young people's feelings in relation to one of the rooms in the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose. Yasmine, aged 20, and Leyla, aged 18, both noted that the 'nook' was exactly how they wanted it and that it felt 'cosy' and 'like a nest to hide away in'. These ideas of privacy, personal connection and being able to physically 'nest' offer insights into how children and young people feel when recounting their experiences of harm or abuse, in a JII or court appearance. Similarly, in another focus group discussing the potential for the space to improve children and young people's experience of the JII, Heather aged 14 noted,

"...the Bairns Hoose should feel quiet and calm, as loud noises might freak other children out, depending on the situation. I find not too much, not too much different noises. If it's too chaotic, it might distract them. Yeah, I feel like sometimes with lots going on, I feel myself starting to get agitated" (Heather, aged 14).

These findings contribute to the wide body of evidence collected in this research, presenting the need for spaces designed for child protection, justice and recovery to create a sense of calm, and a feeling of containment and connection when undergoing difficult processes like interviews or court appearances. Furthermore, key insights on how the space of the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose also has the potential to improve the functions of the Bairns' Hoose model, alongside the aim for the space to be child-centred and calming, was highlighted by all professionals who took part in this study. The space can help improve communication between children, young people, families and professionals and between agencies in North Strathclyde. Children and young people described in this research as feeling calmer and less anxious within the environment. Professionals who work in the environment observed that the setting supported children to engage more comfortably in conversations, recovery work, and investigative processes. Research participants reported that the space helped:

- Improved opportunities for multidisciplinary collaboration
- Support more effective communication and information sharing between professionals working in the Bairns Hoose environment.
- Reduce isolation between agencies whereby processes and actions taken by professionals (like the JII) are visible and involve joint working between agencies
- Create opportunities for reflective practice and shared decision-making
- Provide safer and more supportive working environments for staff

This was described by one professional who took part in a focus group for this research study. Professional 50 described their experience working in the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose space alongside other agencies in a multidisciplinary way. They discussed

“And after a few weeks, the Interview Team started to use the space as well. And that was, I think, prior to that there was, it felt as though it was a sort of, them and us...And both, sort of quite separate functions. And they are separate functions, but I think we feel, again, more comfortable with... We know each other better. We know who lives where. What people like in their tea”.

The Bairns' Hoose environment also enabled more flexible ways of working as spaces are adapted to fulfil different functions, including recovery support, family work, joint investigative interviews, and remote court processes. The findings in this study suggest that physical environments can act as catalysts for organisational and cultural change by supporting more compassionate, coordinated, and relational forms of practice. The capacity of the physical space to adapt to different organisational functions, accommodate various equipment for criminal investigation and court processes, and still support people to feel safe and “at home”, reflects a flexible spatial fabric of the Bairns' Hoose in North Strathclyde. This research presents an openness displayed by professionals in experimenting with new ways of working through a shared, collaborative vision to enact new practices through the design of a space and environment. This is a distinctive feature of the Bairns' Hoose model in North Strathclyde. Developing a meaningful approach to spatial design can only go so far and is not the only factor behind the impetus for change to child protection and justice in Scotland. However, the Bairns' Hoose space and its' built environment reflect an example of what child protection and justice environments **can be**, including having a positive impact on children, young people and their families and professionals using and working in them.

Implications for Practice in North Strathclyde

- Space matters when protecting children and young people. The physical environment directly impacts emotional safety, communication, participation, and recovery.
- Trauma-informed environments should be viewed as essential components of child protection and recovery practice, rather than optional enhancements.
- Co-location supports more responsive multidisciplinary working and improves opportunities for shared decision-making across agencies.
- Children and young people's participation in designing services and environments should continue to be embedded within practice development.
- Professionals benefit from safe, supportive, and collaborative environments that reduce isolation and improve wellbeing.
- Spaces designed for children should prioritise privacy, comfort, flexibility, accessibility, and opportunities for emotional regulation.

Implications for Practice in Children First

The findings in this study reinforce the importance of Children First and partners continuing to advocate for systems change across child protection and justice Scotland. The Bairns' Hoose model in North Strathclyde demonstrates how integrated, compassionate, and child-centred approaches can improve experiences for children, young people and families, while also supporting professionals to work more effectively together. This work highlights that children and young people's participation was central to the development of the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose. Participants described how children influenced decisions about colour schemes, furnishings, sensory features, privacy, and the overall atmosphere, helping to create a space that reflected their needs and experiences. Alongside this, strong leadership, shared ownership, and multidisciplinary collaboration were identified as key enablers of the project. These findings suggest that trauma-informed environments are shaped not only by physical design but also by meaningful participation, collaborative relationships, and a shared commitment to child-centred practice.

Conclusion & Next Steps

The research on the North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose demonstrates that space matters. The environments children and young people enter after experiences of abuse or violence shape how safe, heard, and supported they feel. The findings show that trauma-informed environments, combined with strong multidisciplinary relationships and meaningful participation, have the potential to transform experiences of child protection, justice, and recovery. As Bairns' Hoose services continue to develop across Scotland, there is an opportunity to apply this learning nationally. Future developments should continue to place children and young people's voices at the centre of service and environmental design while supporting collaborative, relational, and recovery-focused practice. Three key findings from this research notes that the space has the potential to impact:

- 1) children and young people's experiences when reporting abuse or harm through a JII - where children and young people who use the Bairns' Hoose could feel less scared, safer, more relaxed and calmer.
- 2) multidisciplinary practices and processes – the use of a shared space and ease of communication helps foster a new sense of being part of a team and understanding processes more effectively.
- 3) functions for gathering evidence through the JII – professionals noted the quality of evidence (recordings and transcription) had improved since they started using the NSBH interview suite.
- 4) the use of the space for family and child-centred recovery – the multidimensional use of space has the potential to reframe how child protection and justice environments are used and interacted with.

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