

Put children first

A manifesto for the 2026 Scottish Parliament

SCOTLAND IS FACING A CHILDHOOD EMERGENCY.

The next Scottish Government must put children first, protect children and protect childhood by delivering:

1

A **comprehensive offer of Whole Family Support** to tackle child poverty and give every family the emotional, practical and financial support they need.

“It feels like there’s no one that helps families at the moment.”

Young person

2

A **consistent Bairns Hoose** to put children’s recovery at the centre of the justice system.

“A year ago, I had no confidence and no hope. Now, I feel proud of myself. I’ve found purpose and I’m doing amazing things with Bairns Hoose by my side.”

Young person, 17 years old

3

A commitment to **urgently tackle Online Harm**, its impact on child development and the right to a safe childhood.

“People in Scotland are worried about staying safe online... whether people are who they say they are.”

Young person, 10 years old

WWW.CHILDRENFIRST.ORG.UK/CAMPAIGNS

Children First is Scotland’s national children’s charity, standing up for children, keeping them safe and supporting them to recover from trauma and abuse through our support line and other national and local services.

**CHILDREN
FIRST** Protecting
Scotland’s
Children

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES TELL US THAT THEY FEEL ALONE.

This means it's harder to support children to go to school, stay safe in their communities and stay safe online.

At the same time, growing numbers of children are looking for help with their mental health,¹ schools are under more strain with many children persistently absent² and children and families face new risks with cybercrime doubling in recent years.³

Almost nine out of ten parents don't know where to turn for support.

Survey for Children First, 2025



POVERTY UNDERMINES THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF OUR BABIES AND CHILDREN.

It limits their educational attainment and restricts their life chances. The cost of inaction is generational.

FAMILIES NEED SUPPORT TO BREAK THIS REPEATING CYCLE.

They need emotional, practical and financial support, offered by people and in spaces they trust.

BUT SCOTLAND IS STUCK IN A CRISIS RESPONSE.

Political and professional systems are distracted by short term needs, overwhelmed by the scale of change required. It's no wonder that Children First found most people, including children, believe growing up in Scotland is worse now than in the past.

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE.

We know this because we see it in the families we work alongside. Even though a combination of crises makes a better future difficult to see, Scotland has the tools it needs to make things better for babies and children now and for future generations.

AS WELL AS MAKING PREVENTION ITS MISSION BY DELIVERING THE THREE COMMITMENTS SET OUT IN THIS MANIFESTO, THE NEXT SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT MUST ALSO:

- Increase the Scottish Child Payment.
- Meet the Child Poverty Targets.
- Keep the Promise.

¹ Almost 100 children a day referred to CAMHS (Children First, 2024).

² Persistent absence rates in Scottish schools are the worst in the UK (Scottish Government, 2024).

³ Cybercrime has doubled since 2019-20 (Scottish Government, 2025).

DELIVER A COMPREHENSIVE OFFER OF WHOLE FAMILY SUPPORT



THE CHALLENGE:

More than ten years ago the Christie Commission said:

“A cycle of deprivation and low aspiration has been allowed to persist because preventative measures have not been prioritised.”

No child should be taken into care or live in poverty because support isn't available. Yet across Scotland, children and families continue to face these injustices.



THE SOLUTION:

Good, whole family support can transform children and families experience of mental health, education and care. It also leads to savings for public services over the longer term. Research from the Institute of Fiscal Studies showed that SureStart generated £2 of financial benefit for every £1 spent.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Whole family support needs a reset. The Scottish Government must prioritise prevention, with a new national strategy and long term funding commitment, learning from the wealth of evidence in Scotland and internationally.

Support line 08000 28 22 33 | childrenfirst.org.uk

Children First, Registered Scottish Charity Number: SC 016092

THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT CAN DELIVER A COMPREHENSIVE OFFER OF WHOLE FAMILY SUPPORT BY:

Demonstrating leadership by example, with 'Show and Tell' sites showing family support hubs in action, open to everyone but targeted towards those communities in most need, offering activities and supports.

Making a new commitment to embed early help and prevention alongside universal services, like family support workers in GPs and schools and Family Group Decision Making alongside children's hearings.

Putting the views and needs of children and families at the heart of services. Family support is based on positive, trusting relationships and working with the whole family.

"Knowing my mum has support as well lifts a weight off my shoulders."

Young Person

Introducing a new 'National Front Door' to help families offering phone and online support at any time, without the need for referrals or thresholds.

Embedding financial wellbeing advisors throughout services. Poverty is a driving force behind many family challenges. Children First support line put £2.5 million back into family's pockets in 2024 with grants, income maximisation and debt management.

DELIVER A HIGH QUALITY, CONSISTENT BAIRNS HOOSE MODEL



THE CHALLENGE:

Scotland's justice system continues to cause children harm. Exhausting delays in cases mean that fear and anticipation surrounding going to court lasts years. Communication during this time is not good enough.

The Bairns Hoose model of reform has made some progress, but there is a danger the model will be diluted and reduced with resources spread too thinly, missing the opportunity for longer term and deeper-rooted change.

THE SOLUTION:

By rolling out the Bairns Hoose model across Scotland with quality and consistency, we can transform children's experiences. This will deliver high quality justice and help children to move on with their lives.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Scotland must take forward the rollout of Bairns Hoose with quality and consistency, to build a stronger justice system and help children recover. This will need long term funding and a commitment to work in line with the national and European Standards.

Over the next five years, every child who needs care in the Bairns Hoose should be able to access it.

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THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT CAN ROLL OUT A HIGH QUALITY, CONSISTENT BAIRNS HOOSE MODEL BY:

Introducing new legislation to safeguard the specialist role of recovery support, the most fragile part of the Bairns Hoose model.

While other services are well established across police, social work and courts, children's recovery support is not always available, despite its critical importance.

Making a long-term national investment in Bairns Hoose

to embed lasting reforms and build strong, sustainable partnerships that put children's long term healing and recovery at the centre. Every Bairns Hoose must have a trauma recovery and advocacy service embedded in it.

A public health campaign to tackle online harm

to help children and families to understand risks and impact, alongside specialist support through the Bairns Hoose for children who experience online crimes.

"I've been through a lot of mental health services, but none have helped me like Bairns Hoose has."

Young Person

Ensuring children's voices shape these reforms,

using the Lundy Model, so children have influence over decisions that affect them and systems stay focused on their needs.

A dedicated Children's Charter backed by legislation

to support children's rights to support, protection and recovery in the care and justice systems. A charter would provide clarity and consistency for families and professionals.

COMMIT TO URGENTLY TACKLING ONLINE HARM



THE CHALLENGE:

Children describe extreme violent and pornographic content as 'unavoidable' online and exposure often begins in primary school. Algorithms and group messaging fuel this exposure and children tell us that aggressive and sexualised language are being normalised. Many children feel they have no control over what they see and believe that the adults around them either don't know enough or are powerless to do anything about it.



WHAT'S NEXT?

The Scottish Government must build a coalition to tackle online harm as a public health crisis, conduct an urgent review of the evidence and roll out a public health campaign, in consultation with children and the international community, to raise awareness of online harm and develop policy solutions to tackle it.

THE SOLUTION:

This is an international problem, which means that there is lots of learning from other countries which Scotland can build upon. Building on Scotland's existing public health expertise, the Scottish Government could look at Sweden and Ireland's use of a public health approach to online harm.

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THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT CAN COMMIT TO URGENTLY TACKLING ONLINE HARM BY:

Developing a new coalition, cutting across the third sector, children's services, child protection, justice and health to establish evidence and clear messaging for children and families.

Providing stronger guidance for parents and teachers around when and how children should have online access.

Being part of a UK wide approach to make sure reserved and devolved powers are all maximised to combat this challenge.

"Social media is a worry because, as a teenager or a younger child it's impossible to know what's real."

Young Person

Undertaking meaningful consultation with children and young people to help children share their experiences and influence decisions.

Recognising online harm within reformed child protection and criminal justice frameworks, to ensure exposure to online violence or sexual content can be fully recognised for the harm it can cause.

For more information contact: lily.humphreys@childrenfirst.org.uk

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