



# PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST

*A manifesto to keep every child in  
your community safe, loved and well.*

Children 1st, Scotland's national children's charity, wants to ensure that governments at every level do everything in their power to protect children and childhood.

While systems around children and families struggle to protect them from poverty and harm, the world they are living in is changing and new risks are emerging. By taking the following six actions governments can support children and young people to grow up safe, happy and together with their families.

- ♥ Tackle child poverty.
- ♥ Protect children from online harm.
- ♥ Invest in early help for families.
- ♥ Support children's mental health.
- ♥ Incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into domestic law at a UK level.
- ♥ Roll out a consistent, high-quality Bairns Hoose.

# Keeping every child safe and loved in their own family

## Tackle child poverty.

Child poverty is being normalised, with almost 250,000 of Scotland's children officially recognised as living in poverty. Children 1st financial wellbeing teams reported a 92% increase in families seeking help last year. Rising costs hit families with children particularly hard, and too often there are barriers between families and the support they are already entitled to. By supporting families to manage their budgets and access the support they are entitled to, our team recorded over £1.9 million in financial gain for families in 2023-24.

Removing the two-child cap and introducing a national programme of financial wellbeing support would stop the welfare system penalising children and families.

## Protect children from online harm.

Online harm is one of the greatest threats to children's wellbeing and their opportunity to enjoy a childhood safe and free from mental or physical harm, including sexual harm. Children describe violent and pornographic content as "unavoidable" online from primary school onwards, but too often, regulation struggles to keep up.

Children, young people and families Children 1st work with are aware of, engaged with and can help to address these challenges, even when they seem insurmountable.

Governments across the UK and world-wide must work together to protect children from online harm as a top priority and to prevent risks as they develop, through research, support to children and young people and ongoing regulation.

## Invest in early help for families.

Families are reaching crisis point before they can get help, leading to an over-reliance on costly child protection interventions which cause more harm than good, in the long term. Children do well when their families do well, but the handful of whole-family wellbeing services available to offer emotional, practical and financial support operate with annual funding pots and constant risk of cuts.

A UK-wide strategy to invest in universally accessible, holistic, early help and family support through multi-disciplinary teams in community hubs is critical to address wider problems like health inequalities and attainment and to help families move away from poverty or avoid it altogether.

## Support children's mental health.

The cost-of-living crisis is impacting upon the mental health of children and their families and thousands of children across Scotland are waiting for mental health support.

Whole family support has been shown to be an effective, early-stage alternative to child adolescent and mental health services (CAMHS) helping to prevent long waiting times and unnecessary clinical interventions and enabling CAHMS to support the children who do require their expertise more quickly.

A UK-wide holistic strategy for children's mental health that offers community support alongside clinical interventions should be developed across the UK, so that children and families do not find themselves 'parked' on waiting lists.

## Incorporate the UNCRC into domestic law at a UK level.

The UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 is a bold commitment to children, young people and their families. This marks an incredibly important moment for children's rights in Scotland, but the lack of UK wide incorporation means there are still gaps.

UK wide incorporation of the UNCRC would simplify and strengthen protections for children's rights so that all children, in all circumstances, have their rights fully protected and respected.

## Roll out a consistent, high-quality Bairns Hoose.

Children who are victims and witnesses are traumatised by their experiences in the criminal justice system, as they are asked to repeat their stories over and over, while facing delays and adjournments. This leads to poor quality evidence that results in prosecutions failing and children and families feeling let down and unsafe. In August 2023 Children 1st opened Scotland's first Bairns Hoose, based on the European Barnahus model, which gives children who experience abuse and violence all the protection, care, justice and recovery support they need under one roof, without causing further trauma.

Rolling out Bairns Hoose would ensure that children can share their stories and pre-record their evidence, so they are not asked to go to court unless absolutely and unavoidably necessary.

### About Children 1st

At Children 1st our ambition is for every child in Scotland to be safe, loved and well with their family. As a charity we offer emotional, practical, and financial support to help families to put children first and campaign to uphold the rights of every child.

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