



Strategic Priorities 2026–2031.

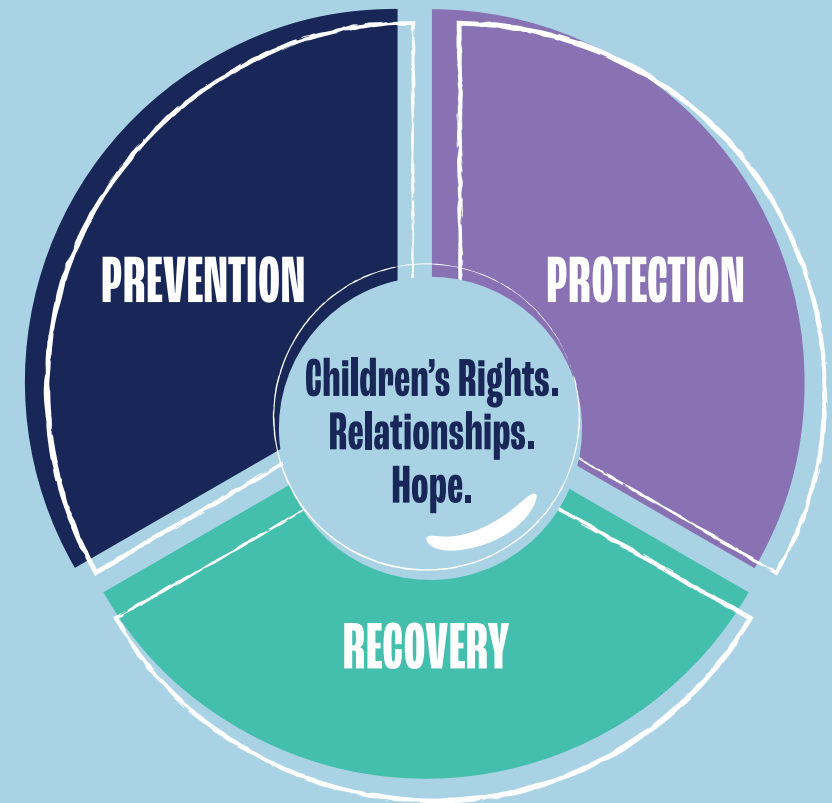
Protecting Children. Protecting Childhood.

Children First is Scotland's national children's charity.

Our purpose.

Our purpose is clear, powerful and rooted in our Royal Charter. We exist to:

- **Prevent harm:** caused by neglect, violence, exploitation, online risks and poverty, while strengthening families and communities.
- **Protect children:** keeping them safe, championing childhood and campaigning to uphold their rights.
- **Support recovery:** helping children heal from trauma and abuse through advocacy, care and therapeutic services.



In 1884, when our founder, James Grahame, was horrified by the poverty, neglect and abuse faced by children he passionately declared:

“If not us, then who?”

That call to action still drives everything we do today.

“I want them (social workers and teachers) to know that I worry about my family as they are so far away.”

Euan, 6

“Justice takes so long. Far too long. I feel like I’ve lived my whole life before the court has even proceeded.”

Olivia, 13

Our vision.

Every child in Scotland will be **safe and loved**, with their right to a happy childhood **protected**, respected and fulfilled.

Scotland will be a **world leader in preventing harm to children** whose lives will be free from poverty, neglect, abuse, violence, exploitation and online harm.



Our mission continues.

As Scotland's national children's charity, we stand up for children because every child should have a safe and happy childhood.

We protect children from harm, keep them safe and support them to recover from trauma and abuse through our national support line and in their homes and communities across Scotland.

Our values.

Everything we do is underpinned by our values:

With **love**, we put children first.

With **purpose**, we transform lives together.

With **strength**, we do whatever it takes to protect Scotland's children.

"I worry about things on the news."

Eva, 7

"I wish for young people's voices to be heard and considered as important."

Bella, 15

"It is really important to keep families together and not split us up."

Liam, 10

Children are more at risk. Childhood is under threat. Together we can change that.

This strategic plan has been developed at a time when we have never been more concerned about the safety and wellbeing of Scotland's children.

Despite progressive laws and a global reputation for children's rights, Scotland is failing to protect childhood and the consequences for babies, children and young people are increasingly severe. Whilst we have made some progress, the gap between what Scotland says and what Scotland does is wider than ever.

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Despite all of this, when we listened to children, young people and families' views about what should be the focus for this strategic plan, they told us they feel anxious, afraid and alone in coping with the damaging impact of inequality, violence, chronic poverty, abuse, neglect, mental health struggles and exploitation.

Children are also facing new threats and we risk sleepwalking into the digital destruction of childhood. From a very young age children are exposed to bullying, extreme pornography and violence, sexual exploitation and sextortion at alarming rates.

We must wake up to the damage that is being done because digital devices are being placed in children's hands before they are ready and we don't yet properly understand the impact this has on their development, safety and emotional wellbeing.

Public services are stretched to breaking point, funding is scarce and charities like Children First are struggling to be there for the growing number of children and families who need us.

At Children First we are determined to close this gap so that every child in Scotland enjoys a safe and happy childhood.

We are proud to have led the way in trauma-informed care, relationship-based practice, whole family support and child-centred justice.

Alongside children and with our partners and supporters, we have effectively campaigned to raise awareness of the impact of abuse, neglect and trauma, to protect children from physical punishment, for the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and we have begun to transform the way we treat child victims and witnesses of abuse and violence.

Despite commitments to public sector reform, Scotland has not made the promised shift to prevention. Services are built around systems rather than children and families struggle to access the support they need. As a result, more children are put at risk and families are pushed into crisis.

Children and their families must be met with compassion, understanding and offers of support, but too often they are subject to process driven, punitive responses. Instead of being strengthened, families are being judged harshly and separated too quickly.

As a society we are at risk of forgetting how precious children are and how essential a safe childhood is. If we want to protect our future, we need to protect children now.

We need to remember the science of child development; babies need connection, toddlers have tantrums, children need freedom to play, teenagers test boundaries and that's how they learn, grow and develop to become secure, well-functioning adults.

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As adults, we must create safe, nurturing and tolerant communities where children can thrive. That means investing in play, creativity and sport, giving children real alternatives to being online.

To keep the promise made after the Independent Care Review, we need a radical transformation that truly puts children at the centre of how services are designed and delivered. Most importantly, we must listen to children's hopes and help realise their dreams.

Scotland has all the policy, legislation, knowledge and resources to make a good childhood possible for every child. We know what works; we have the solutions.

Hopeful, ambitious and deeply rooted in the voices of children and families this strategic plan has also been shaped by colleagues, volunteers, partners and funders.

We can close the gap between what Scotland says and what Scotland does.

If we get it right for children, we will get it right for everybody.

This is more than a plan; it is a wakeup call.



Mary Glasgow, CEO



Joy Barlow, Chair

“I worry about not being safe.”

Finn, 10



“Having a phone has ruined my time as a child.”

Poppy, 10

“No one helps families at the moment.”

Ellen, 15



“I worry about being cold in the winter.”

Callum, 11



Childhood in Scotland is under threat, we have to protect it.

1 IN 5

children across Scotland live in poverty.¹

95



daily average referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Scotland.²

33%

of children have no adult in their life they can trust (P5 – S6).³

DOUBLED

Reports of online child abuse doubled in Scotland between 2023/24 & 2024/25.⁷

85%

of parents feel they have nowhere to turn when things get tough.⁸

84%

of people are worried about the impact of social media on children.⁹

79%

of young people are worried about seeing harmful online content.¹⁰



2/3

almost 2/3 of Scottish adults surveyed believe growing up in Scotland is worse than ever.⁹

92%

of children and young people aged 11-25 in Scotland are worried about mental health.¹⁰

34%

of sexual crimes recorded in 2024/25 by police related to a victim under 18.⁴



1 IN 5

children have been sexually abused.⁵

1 IN 3



young people experience at least one traumatic event before the age of 18.⁶

60%

of families we supported were worried about their child's wellbeing.¹¹

30%

of people contacting our national support line faced financial hardship.¹¹

1. Poverty and Income Inequality in Scotland 2022 - 2025, Scottish Government 2. CAMHS waiting times, March 2026 3. Health and Wellbeing Census Scotland: 2021/22 4. Recorded Crime in Scotland, 2024 -2025 5. Child Sexual Abuse in Europe, Council of Europe 2003 6.UK Trauma Council

7. Chief Constable, Police Scotland in evidence to Scottish Parliament Criminal Justice Committee, Nov 2025 8. ScotPulse Survey for Children First May 2025 9. ScotPulse Survey for Children First Sept 2024 10. Truth About Youth 2025, Young Scot 11. Children First Statistics Jan – Dec 2025

“(Young people worry about) telling the truth and what might happen.”

Sophia, 17

“When I grow up I want to be a builder. I want to build houses for homeless people.”

Kieran, 10

“(I worry) about being taken away from mum.”

Noah, 9

“Young children deserve a childhood without screens.”

Jessica, 14

Closing the gap between policy and practice: our strategic goals.



● Campaign to radically transform systems for children

Campaign to make sure that incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and delivery of the promise results in **radical transformation for children** within family support, health, child protection and justice systems.



● Develop and deliver family support and therapeutic services

Develop and deliver **family support and therapeutic services** that strengthen families' ability to protect their children and manage practical, emotional and financial challenges.



● Invest in our support line

Invest in our **national support line** to provide a digital front door to family support services so that every family in Scotland has a place to turn when they need help.



● Demand sustainable investment in prevention

Demand the promised **shift in long-term, sustainable investment in prevention** to keep children safe, loved and well in their own families and communities.



● Campaign to reclaim childhood and prevent online harm to children

Lead a campaign to reclaim childhood from screens and prevent **online harm** to children.



● Grow and develop Bairns Hoose support

Grow and develop our advocacy, rights and recovery services based within **Bairns Hoose** to children in need of care, protection and justice.



● Expand family group decision making (FGDM)

Expand independent family group decision making services to **ensure no child is unnecessarily removed from their home** without their family network having the opportunity to contribute to safety planning and decision making.



MAKING IT HAPPEN

Children's voices

We will **amplify** children's voices and inspire collective action and put them at the heart of every decision.

Strong partnerships

We will work in partnership with others because it will take **collective action** to achieve the change that all children deserve.

Our people

We will **develop** our teams and volunteers and be a place of belonging, inspiration and action.

Known and trusted

We will become a trusted household name, known for **transforming children's lives** through our services and our campaigns to grow income and partnerships.

Technology that connects

We will use technology ethically, built around children's rights and safety, to **strengthen relationships** and support our work.

Solid foundations

We will build on solid foundations, ensuring transparency and accountability in everything we do, while creating **robust financial management** to secure sustainable impact.



“(My Children First worker) helped me believe I could get through.”

Mia, 17

“Children First actually listens.”

Sequin, 17

Children can't protect themselves. They want adults to listen and keep them safe.

Everyone in Scotland has a collective responsibility to look out for babies, children and young people. We must listen and take what children are saying seriously.

This is central to keeping them safe, supporting their wellbeing and upholding their rights. As a society we need to create safe spaces where young people feel heard and respected, empower communities and professionals to act when concerns arise and foster a culture of vigilance and compassion.

“It was difficult to leave my mum and family and to have to leave my brother. I didn't like having to visit at different times to my brother. Some of my family stayed with my aunt but they (social workers) came and took me away and I didn't always know what was happening. I would have liked to know.

Harris, 9



“I don't feel safe in my local community.”

Archie, 13



“I don't like how they threaten to take me away. I'm still scared and it's been a long time.”

Isla, 16



Our vision delivered.

We all have a part to play in **closing the gap** between what Scotland says and what Scotland does to **protect children**.

This strategic plan focuses on the actions Children First will take to help close that gap, alongside government, local authorities, social work, education, health, justice, police, other third sector partners, supporters and families.

If we are successful, we will see:

- No child lives in poverty.
- Every child stays safe and loved in their own family wherever possible.
- Every child who needs it accesses a quality Bairns Hoose.
- Children are protected from online harm through stronger regulation, delayed access to devices and better advice and support for parents and caregivers.
- All children's lives are free from racism, discrimination and exclusion.
- Childhood is protected and celebrated at every stage.



The difference we make.

We will strengthen and expand our emotional, practical and financial support, locally and nationally, to increase the number of babies, children, young people and families we reach. We will work hard to support those most at risk and marginalised communities, ensuring our support is equitable, inclusive and responsive to evolving needs. We will challenge everyone in Scotland to uphold and progress children's rights.

We will show that our work has made an impact by measuring the difference that our local and national services and our championing of children's voices and rights make.

As a result, children will:

● Have better relationships

"It helped me a lot and made everyone happy."

Dan, 12

● Be safer and feel more loved within their own family network

"My Children First worker helped me go back to my family and now we all live together."

Liam, 10

● Feel more heard and that their experiences are better understood

"My Children First worker helps my teacher understand I am worried or scared and not behaving badly"

Ankur, 9



● Be more able to recover from trauma and abuse

"My support worker saved my life quite a few times. Without her I would be lost."

Mia, 17

● Feel happier and have improved wellbeing

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

Anne, 15

● Feel like they belong and be more connected with their communities

"I finally feel like I belong."

Ross, 12

● Be more able to learn and grow

"Now school and home is a big thumbs up"

Alfie, 13

Worried about a child?

Our support line is here to help:

Call free: 08000 28 22 33 Webchat: [childrenfirst.org.uk](https://www.childrenfirst.org.uk)

If not us, then who?

Together, we can protect children and childhood.

There are lots of ways you can stand with us and keep children safe:

Donate

**Leave a gift
in your Will**

Volunteer

Fundraise

Campaign

**Follow us
on social
media**

**Sign up
for our
newsletter**



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Registered Scottish Charity Number: SC016092

Support line 08000 28 22 33 | Fundraising 0345 10 80 111 | childrenfirst.org.uk