



NSPCC Scotland 5 Point Plan for Prevention: Scottish Parliament Elections 2026

Introduction

NSPCC Scotland believe that all children have the right to a safe, happy, and healthy childhood. Ahead of the next Scottish Parliament election, we are calling on all political parties to work together to improve the lives of babies, children and families in Scotland.

The evidence is clear that all of Scotland's children can reach their full potential when nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities. Scotland has long aspired to giving all children the best possible start in life. Yet, too often child protection is only prioritised in response to distressing revelations of abuse, neglect, sexual exploitation and child death. Dozens of cases, over more than four decades, cite individual failings and familiar problems – professionals not talking to each other, not putting the picture together and missing opportunities to act.

The impact and cost of child abuse and neglect requires a much higher level of national priority and investment than is currently the case. In a challenging social and economic context, we cannot afford to fail another generation of children. The next Scottish Government must aspire to prevent unnecessary suffering for all of Scotland's children.

We must think creatively about how we harness and redirect our collective capacity so that we are targeting our finite resource where it will have the biggest impact. In recent years we have seen some encouraging policy shifts. Incorporation of the UNCRC into Scot's Law, if fully operationalised, will put rights at the centre of decision making and the Early Child Development Transformational Change Programme is driving a more coherence national direction to reduce long-term costs and improve outcomes for babies, children, families and communities.

We now know much more about what children need to thrive. It is well understood and widely reflected in national policy that positive early experiences and secure attachment can bring extensive benefits across the life course. Ensuring families can access a spectrum of high quality, relationship focused support at the earliest point must become Scotland's number one investment priority. This can be achieved through a more dynamic use of data and innovation in both policy and practice so that we are identifying risk early and providing families with support before problems escalate. We must also pay close attention to the changing nature of risk, including online, so that we are better supporting children and young people in their relationships.

The next Scottish parliamentary elections can define a new era of preventative collaboration across Scotland. Building on the key learning from Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), this 5-point plan for prevention offers a critical mechanism to change how we think about children's systems and services to enable more equitable deployment of valuable resources across the system, so that challenges are identify and addressed before they become entrenched.

Decisive action taken now can change the trajectory of childhood in Scotland and improve life chances for many generations to come.

The next Scottish Government must:

- 1. Protect children in the earliest years**
- 2. Strengthen the child protection system**
- 3. Prevent child sexual abuse in Scotland**
- 4. Keep children safe online**
- 5. Mandate Healthy Relationships education in the Scottish Curriculum (RSHP)**

1. Invest in babies and very young children

The case for investing in babies and young children

The earliest years of a child's life are a critical developmental period when many of the building blocks they need for later life are put in place. Babies depend on sensitive, responsive care to grow and develop healthily, but many are not getting the care they need. We know more about what harms and protects babies than we ever have and yet we are still failing to provide the best start for all of our babies and young children. Scottish Children's Reporter Administration found 'Proportionately, more Child Protection Orders are granted for very young children (especially new-born babies) than any other age,' reflecting their high risk and vulnerability.

Investing in babies and young children reduces the need for costly interventions later in life, tackles inequalities and gives all children the best chance to realise their potential. All political parties should include a focus on babies and young children within their political agendas.

Key stats

- 15% of all referrals to the Children's Hearing System were for children in the first year of their life and more children were referred in the first year of their life than at any other age.
- 17% of all children in Scotland are currently identified as having a developmental concern at their 27 – 30 month health visitor check (25% for those living in low-income households).
- 40% of looked-after children are identified as having a developmental concern at 27 – 30 month check.

What needs to happen?

The policy landscape affecting babies is fragmented with a range of early years policies spread across different government directorates. We are calling on all parties now to commit to reaching every baby born in Scotland with universal services and identifying and helping those who need specialist support. A joined up cross-government strategy is key to improving outcomes and coordinating policy interventions.



Recommendations

1. Invest in infant – parent relationship teams that support babies social and emotional wellbeing

- Re-establish early years as a cross-party priority, with a clear focus on parent–infant relationships. Strengthen statutory guidance on Children’s Services Planning and spending to prioritise early years through the delivery of high-quality holistic family support.

2. Develop and upskill the workforce around babies’ rights, their emotional wellbeing and healthy development

- Provide fully resourced support to upskill universal and early years practitioners and provide sustainable, multi-year funding to support delivery of a spectrum of therapeutic interventions by statutory services and the third sector. Recognise the third-sector’s role in delivering essential mental health support.

3. Keep the Promise to babies

- Ensure specialist infant –parent relationship teams are available to all families and review the Scottish legal system to ensure it can make decisions in the best interests of babies in the care system. Ensure babies achieve a permanent placement within a reasonable timescale, at this critical time in their development.

2. Strengthen the child protection system

The 20th anniversary of GIRFEC provides an opportunity to consider how well Scotland’s national approach to supporting families is serving those carrying the heaviest load. Local authority social work is the backbone of the system with statutory responsibility in child protection but there are long-standing issues around recruitment and retention, heavy caseloads and diminishing resources. Multi-agency working is critical to ensuring children’s and families’ needs are identified and addressed as soon as possible and the time is ripe to assess how this could be strengthened to deliver the aspiration of GIRFEC and The Promise.

Key stats

- 24% of children with Child Protection Orders were aged under 20 days old 49.2% were under two years
- Around half (48%) of children added to the child protection register in 2023 – 24 lived in one of the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland. This compares to 3% in the 20% least deprived areas in Scotland.
- The most common concerns identified for children are domestic abuse, neglect, parental substance use, mental ill health and emotional abuse.

What needs to happen?

We urge all political parties to engage fully and meaningfully with children and families social work in devising their manifesto and beyond. Social Work Services must sit at the heart of an multi–disciplinary approach to prevention and protection. Work to design and deliver a National Social Work Agency should prioritise early intervention with vulnerable families with very young children.

Recommendations

1. Specialist, multi-disciplinary, preventative child protection teams

- Develop specialist, multi-disciplinary, preventative child protection teams in every area, fully integrated with children and family social work services and comprising of health visitor, social workers, infant-parent relationship lead and voluntary sector.

2. Introduce a national digital 'single unique identifier'

- Develop and test a national digital 'single unique identifier' record system for babies and families to facilitate data linkage with time. This will track decisions and progress, support agreements, and ensure continuity, transparency, and accountability across services.

3. Give Social Workers the time, space, tools and confidence to work preventatively with families

- As part of the creation of a National Social Work Agency for Scotland, consideration given to a maximum indicative case load for children and families social workers, with a distinct focus on how caseloads can be weighted to prioritise early intervention with vulnerable families.

3. Prevent Child Sexual Abuse in Scotland

A public health approach to the prevention of child sexual abuse in Scotland

We believe that as a society, we should be focusing our efforts on ensuring that child sexual abuse is prevented before it occurs, before people at risk of abusing become offenders, and before potential victims become actual victims. To date the societal response to child abuse has focused largely on bringing perpetrators to justice and providing some children with therapy and support. We must aspire to prevent child sexual abuse in all its forms.

Understanding child sexual abuse, and what causes it, is an important step towards developing effective prevention strategies.¹ We have been concerned for several years about the lack of concerted action in Scotland on tackling child sexual abuse. This is in marked contrast to other parts of the UK, notably England and Wales, which have discrete strategies and/or funding streams.

Key stats

- A 2021 review of the literature on prevalence in the UK concluded that 15% of females and 5% of males will experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16.
- This means at least 80,000 children in Scotland will have been affected by this issue before they leave high school. There is no data for Scotland on how many children have experienced child sexual abuse in Scotland.
- In 2012 the NSPCC estimated the cost of sexual abuse to the UK economy as being £3.2 billion. Every pound spent on prevention is both an investment and a saving.

¹(Smallbone et al, 2008).

What needs to happen?

As a critical first step to address this, we are calling for better data on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse to identify levels of sexual offending against children in Scotland. We are also calling for the development of a national strategy for tackling child sexual abuse in all its forms. By taking a public health approach to the prevention of sexual offending against children, our children will be able to grow up in a safer Scotland protected from harm both on and offline.

Recommendations

1. Develop a coordinated response to prevent child sexual abuse across Government

- This must include fundamental reform of the child protection system in Scotland and investment in specialist, accredited, therapeutic support for child victims.

2. Produce and resource a national action plan to prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE)

- Invest in Scotland-specific research and data collection on the scale and nature of child sexual abuse and exploitation, and develop an national action plan, with online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) as a core part, to address findings.

3. Design and resource a child protection system that can identify and respond to child sexual abuse

- Urgently address the long-term downward trend in recorded concerns about child sexual abuse within social work statistics.²

4. Protecting children online

Key messages

The online world is an integral part of children's lives. Children and young people learn, play, and socialise online – they are clear that they enjoy many benefits from social media, messaging apps, gaming services and access to the wider online world. Many children do not distinguish between their 'online' and 'offline' worlds, with both parts informing who they are and their life experiences. As well as benefits, the online world also carries risks to children which must be addressed.

The scale of risk and harm that children continue to face online is unacceptable. With so many children using social networks, gaming and messaging sites, young people are increasingly exposed to the threat of abuse. Child safety online policy must keep pace with the intensifying and ever-evolving online threat facing our children, particularly in relation to Generative Artificial Intelligence. The Scottish Government needs to consider risks as well as opportunities in relation to emerging technologies.

²(Nelson, S. 2022).

Key stats

- More than 3,000 online grooming crimes have been recorded by Police Scotland during the past five years,
- 3,158 Communicating Indecently with a Child offences have been recorded since 2020.
- In the last two years they have reached record levels, with more than 700 offences being logged each year (748 in 2023/24 and 765 in 2022/23).

What needs to happen?

A Scotland-wide approach should bring together education, child protection and law enforcement to foster a preventive and protective environment and keep children safe online. We want the next Scottish Government to provide clear leadership on prevention and recovery efforts, retaining a strong and ambitious National Child Safety Online Action Plan, updated annually, that complements the Online Safety Act and forms a key plank of a wider public health approach to preventing child sexual abuse in all its forms.

Recommendations

1. Develop a coordinated response to prevent child sexual abuse across Government

- Develop a new Child Safety Online Strategy for Scotland drawing from the [Model National Response](#), which upholds children's rights and ensures they can access the benefits of the online world, whilst also addressing the risks

2. Establish mechanisms to meaningfully consult with children about online safety policy

- Establish formal mechanisms to ensure children and young people are meaningfully consulted in the development and implementation of online safety policy.

3. Ensure the rapid advancement of AI in public services is serving overlooked communities

- Whilst we await legislation from Westminster, we call on the Scottish Government to establish a Strategic AI Advisory Group to provide expert advice to Ministers on the adoption of AI across the public sector to ensure key principles like child safety and equality are embedded in all national activity related to AI.

5. Make healthy relationships education mandatory

All children and young people in Scotland have a right to receive consistent, relevant and age- and developmentally-appropriate relationship, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education. RSHP education is an opportunity to make sure that all children and young people know that they have a right to be treated, and responsibility to treat others, with dignity and respect. It can help pupils recognise healthy and unhealthy behaviour, and is a key component in protecting children and young people from abuse.

Key stats

- Two-thirds of adults (67%) in Scotland believe Relationship, Sexual Health and Parenting (RSHP) education should be compulsory.
- 90% of adults believe that relationships and sex education should include children being taught about healthy and unhealthy relationships, safety, understanding the types of abuse and how to seek help and online risks.

What needs to happen?

Scotland is the only part of the UK where this vital part of education has no statutory underpinning. And children and young people are, or are risk of, being harmed as a result. Through our work with young people in Scotland, we know that the actual RSHP children and young people receive can be inconsistent and can fail to cover the issues of importance to them. We think learning about healthy relationships and healthy bodies should be as core an entitlement for all children as learning to read and write.

Recommendations

1. Make healthy relationships education mandatory

- A statutory duty on education authorities to provide RSHP education and statutory recognition of children's right to RSHP education.

2. Develop healthy relationships education guidance for teacher

- Clear, practice-based RSHP guidance for teachers which provides tangible examples of how RSHP should be delivered and how children's progress should be measured.

3. Give teachers time, space, tools and confidence to deliver RSHP

- Take action to ensure that teachers have sufficient time and resource to deliver effective RSHP, including professional learning routes and options for specialisation.