

Getting it right for every baby

Actionable insights from local areas in Scotland



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Introduction

The first years of life are a critical period in which the foundations for physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development are established, influencing a child's path for decades to come. Beyond building this groundwork for later life, getting it right in these crucial early years ensures that every child experiences the care they need and deserve.

Through this project, Nesta set out to develop a clearer understanding of the support currently available during the first years of a baby's life and to identify practical opportunities to transition Scotland's early childhood system towards a more preventative, consistent and integrated model. This work provides invaluable insights and reflections from leaders and practitioners working to support babies and young children across Scotland now.

This report sets out Nesta's key insights and recommendations informed by that work. These recommendations directly support the ambitions of a number of key national policy areas in Scotland: specifically driving public sector reform and shifting to prevention, improving population health, tackling child poverty, improving early child development and keeping The Promise.

While the project focused specifically on early childhood, many of the recommendations have broader applicability and offer valuable insights for all services and programmes supporting children and families.

The report identifies the rationale for some specific additional funding, however the main thrust of our recommendations focuses on the opportunities to drive change within the existing system by unlocking the immense latent value and capacity that exists within current infrastructure.

Achieving this requires coordinated action at both national and local levels. While local authorities have significant scope to shape services and systems for families, national partners must establish the enabling conditions that empower local implementation.

Ultimately, our aim is to ensure that every child in Scotland grows up feeling safe, healthy and loved, and that we have the vision, policy, strategies and support for families in place that ensures this.

Summary findings and recommendations

The current landscape: strengths and challenges

The project examined the existing environment for supporting early childhood in Scotland. It identified the following key strengths and challenges in the system.

Existing strengths to build on

Cross-sectoral commitment:

There is unified dedication to the principles of prevention, relational practice and placing families at the heart of all services.

Building trust through continuity of care:

Recognition that trust is fostered through consistent relationships and warm handovers.

'No wrong door' approach: There is a commitment to collaboration as a way of ensuring families are easily able to engage with support, regardless of their entry point.

Third sector cornerstone: The third sector is recognised as a valuable and essential foundation of the current service landscape in Scotland.

Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) as a driver: GIRFEC remains the key enabler and primary driver of professional practice.

Key challenges to address

A strategic 'baby blind spot': Policies and plans often prioritise all-age approaches or older age groups leaving babies under represented.

Inconsistent and reactive service pathways: The current system prioritises immediate risk over early help meaning many families remain unsupported until they reach a breaking point.

Short-term and disjointed funding: Funding is frequently time-limited and siloed, limiting opportunities for local areas to develop longer-term and joined-up approaches.

Workforce challenges: Capacity constraints force practitioners to prioritise high-need cases over preventative care and limit collaborative planning.

Weaknesses in data infrastructure: Unlinked datasets and systems increase admin burdens and limit evidence-based planning.

Key themes and recommendations

Overall aim: Babies and families get better, earlier and more consistent support and services to support their wellbeing and development

Theme 1: Strategy, leadership and governance

Key recommendation: Make early childhood a priority

What will happen as a result: Pregnancy and early childhood is elevated as a national priority and leaders across systems work to champion joined-up support for babies and their families

Theme 2: Support available to families

Key recommendation: Ensure a consistent and accessible offer of early help is available

What will happen as a result: All families can access early support, in a format that suits them, through a seamless 'no wrong door' journey

Theme 3: Funding, accountability and improvement

Key recommendation: Ensure funding and accountability mechanisms drive vision aligned-delivery

What will happen as a result: Multi-year funding commitments and pooled budgets ensure that preventative work in early childhood receives guaranteed, proportionate funding

Theme 4: Workforce skills, capacity and collaboration

Key recommendation: Develop a sustainable and capable workforce

What will happen as a result: multi-agency collaboration becomes a system standard and practitioners regain the capacity for sustained, relationship based early help

Theme 5: Data and operational infrastructure

Key recommendation: Develop seamless data infrastructure and guidance that enables best practice

What will happen as a result: Seamless data sharing arrangements reduce the burden on practitioners and families while partners use data proactively to inform planning decisions

The full list of national and local recommendations is included in the detailed theme section and appendix 2.

Theme 1: Strategy, leadership and governance

What would good look like?



Strategic prioritisation and policy alignment: Early childhood is prioritised and aligned within and across policy and strategic planning at the local and national level and backed by clear, actionable guidance



Integrated governance: Robust governance structures at local and national level dismantle traditional silos, ensuring clear accountability and the seamless alignment of priorities, budgets and plans across agencies.



Clear and distributed leadership: Leaders across the system work to champion joined-up early childhood support, empower teams to experiment and collaborate and foster a culture of innovation and improvement.

What are the current challenges?

- ▶ **The 'baby blind spot':** In both national and local policy, early childhood is frequently overshadowed by broader, all-age initiatives leaving infants underrepresented in strategic planning.
- ▶ **Fragmented governance and siloed stewardship:** Early childhood governance is frequently fragmented and lacks clear, cross-system stewardship and accountabilities.
- ▶ **Reliance on individual 'champions':** Translating strategic aspirations into frontline practice remains difficult because success often relies on the efforts of specific individuals rather than a systemic, collective and sustainable framework.
- ▶ **Overlooked third sector:** The third sector is recognised as a vital delivery partner but often viewed as an add on when it comes to strategic planning.

"There's a misconception that it's about delivering babies, then weighing babies – it's all nice and simple – that the real work starts when children get older. So there's something about how we frame the importance of this agenda. Making the case and taking babies out of the shadows."

Area lead interviewee

Recommendation 1: Make early childhood a priority

Scottish Government must

Set out a vision and policy commitment

- **Define a clear vision:** Set out early childhood priorities that re-establish babies and early childhood as a top Scottish Government priority.
- **Embed across policy:** Ensure the vision and priorities are reflected in national policy, frameworks and delivery programmes.

Enshrine governance mechanisms

- **Adopt a cross-government approach:** Align early childhood priorities across broader child policies, including Whole Family Support, ELC, The Promise, and tackling child poverty.
- **Establish accountable governance:** Drive progress with cross-portfolio oversight, regular reporting to Cabinet and Parliament, and independent scrutiny (via a Cabinet sub-committee, parliamentary committee, or expert external panel).

Local areas must

Establish pre-birth and early childhood as a shared strategic priority

- **Unite to create a singular, cross-agency vision** for early childhood aligned to national government priorities.
- **Embed this across all governance and planning structures** with clear and transparent accountabilities for delivery and measuring progress.
- **Formally integrate third sector** as core partners in strategic planning and governance.

Theme 2: Support available to families

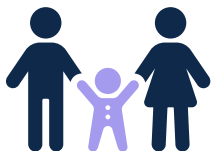
What would good look like?



Available services and supports: Families can access a seamless continuum of practical, financial and emotional support that ranges from universally accessed early help to highly targeted, intensive interventions.



Support focuses on early help pathways: There are clear, well-communicated and consistent routes for families to be supported before needs emerge or become critical.



Family involvement: Families are actively involved in the design of services.

What are the current challenges?

- ▶ **Inconsistent service offer:** Service availability, particularly for the crucial tier of 'additional' support (eg play and stay, family 'drop in' support) that sits between universal (eg universal health visiting) and intensive (eg intensive family support teams), varies significantly across local areas due to pressures on universal services, erosion of community-based provision, and the absence of a nationally defined 'core offer' of support.
- ▶ **Reactive systems:** Current delivery structures prioritise acute risk management and high-threshold crises over proactive early intervention and lower-level help.
- ▶ **Unclear support pathways:** Lack of well-established and communicated pathways means there is a 'missing middle' of families with emerging needs who are often left to navigate services independently until challenges escalate.
- ▶ **Universal touchpoints drop off at a crucial point:** Routine universal services drop off after a child's first birthday at the very point where many development needs become more apparent.
- ▶ **Gaps in family-led planning:** Family input into service design and improvement is more often viewed as a compliance check than a tool for engagement and improvement.

"There's definitely a gap in terms of that middle group of families. You're relying on parents being quite proactive – understanding, noticing what's happening with their child."

Workshop participant

Recommendation 2: Ensure a consistent and accessible offer of early help is available

Scottish Government must

Update and strengthen expectations around delivery

- **Update Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) guidance:** Refresh the GIRFEC framework and practice model with specific guidance for pregnancy and early childhood.
- **Define a national 'core offer':** Establish clear guidance for a universal support package from pregnancy through early childhood, emphasising community-based, co-located services for early help and establishing clear pathways for families.

Review and strengthen elements of existing national touchpoints

- **Fulfill the national health visiting action plan:** Fully implement the recommendations in the [enhancing delivery of the health visiting service action plan](#).
- **Review relationships and responsibilities between key services:** Review the relationship between health visiting and other potentially contiguous services such as midwifery and Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) to ensure responsibilities are most effectively distributed and to strengthen coordination, handovers and touchpoints between services.
- **Test innovative local approaches:** Use improvement methodologies to support tests of change around assessment points, support pathways, multi-agency pathways and extra visit opportunities.

Local areas must

Review existing local early childhood systems and services

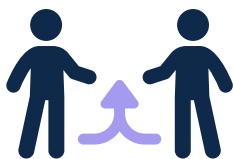
- **Carry out a review of existing supports and services:** Use recognised guidance (ideally provided by Scottish Government) to identify strengths and areas for improvement within existing systems of pre-birth and early childhood support.
- **Develop a prioritised improvement plan:** Based on this review, develop a cross-agency improvement plan that clearly defines shared strategic priorities for change, sets out roles and responsibilities, and monitoring arrangements to track progress.
- **Strengthen protocols and pathways for supporting lower-level and emerging need:** Work cross agency to map and strengthen standardised pathways of support particularly for emerging and lower-level need and focusing on how families are supported into and between services.

Theme 3: Funding, accountability and improvement

What would good look like?



Sustainable, long-term funding that supports high-quality services: Funding enables strategic and sustainable delivery.



Aligned and proportionate accountabilities: Reporting is aligned and actively used to inform local and national decision-making.



Impact, learning and improvements: Evidence, data and information sharing drive planning, learning and improvement.

What are the current challenges?

- ▶ **Short-term and insecure funding cycles:** Funding is frequently time limited and volatile, creating operational uncertainty, staff instability and recurring disruption to long-term relational work with families.
- ▶ **Siloed and rigid commissioning:** Resources are tied to specific sectors or rigid targets rather than holistic family needs, forcing local services to adapt to funder requirements over community priorities.
- ▶ **Under investment in early childhood (ages 0–1):** Funding streams routinely prioritise older age groups or all-age cohorts, leaving infants underrepresented in resource allocation.
- ▶ **Misaligned accountabilities and short-term metrics:** Reporting frameworks focus heavily on short-term quantitative outputs rather than qualitative evidence or system learning.
- ▶ **Lack of structures for continuous learning and improvement:** Reporting demands prioritise compliance over reflective practice, offering limited time, space or support for cross-sectoral peer learning networks and iterative service improvement.

"Sustained and long-term funding commitments are essential to embed preventative early childhood support. Short-term funding cycles create uncertainty and limit workforce stability."

Survey respondent

Recommendation 3: Ensure funding and accountability mechanisms drive vision-aligned delivery

Scottish Government must

Maximise, prioritise and align existing funding and spend on early childhood and early help

- **Review funding alignment:** Examine Scottish Government baby/child/family funding to streamline and simplify local distribution.
- **Identify new investment needs:** Target gaps in core national programmes Universal Health Visiting Pathway (UHVP), Family Nurse Partnership (FNP), Allied Health Professionals (AHPs), national data infrastructure, and local co-located community support.
- **Ensure fair allocation:** Guarantee babies and young children receive a proportionate share of existing national funding programmes.
- **Provide multi-year funding:** Shift local authorities and third-sector partners to indicative multi-year commitments to stabilise staffing and support long-term planning.
- **Refine financial tracking:** Introduce an annual tracking framework to monitor spend by programme, age cohort, and prevention type, aligned with the Prevention Unit's budgeting guidance.

Establish shared progress measures, success indicators and reporting structures

- **Mandate early childhood planning:** Amend the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 to place a statutory duty on local areas to plan and report specifically on early childhood prevention and early help.
- **Unify success measures:** Collaborate nationally and locally to establish a shared set of early childhood success indicators aligned with the updated National Performance Framework.
- **Streamline reporting:** Replace disjointed national programme reporting for Children's Services Planning Partnerships (CSPPs) and other strategic bodies with a single standardised format, using the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund toolkit as a foundation (with specific additions for pregnancy and early childhood).

Develop opportunities for learning and improvement

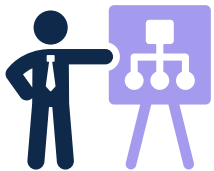
- **Establish a national learning network:** Create a national support network providing peer-to-peer learning and improvement opportunities for local areas.

Theme 4: Workforce skills, capacity and collaboration

What would good look like?



Workforce skills and capacity: The workforce has the skills and individual and collective capacity to use family-centred practices and address emerging needs.



Workforce and organisational collaboration: Individual organisations are coordinating to design and deliver seamless support for families.

"I think everybody comes to work to want to do a really good job, but the work pressures, the time pressures you've got – you've not always got the time to phone everyone you might want to phone."

Workshop participant

What are the current challenges?

- ▶ **Capacity constraints:** Staffing shortages, high caseload and complexity, and administrative burden leave the system with 'no elastic' forcing practitioners to prioritise acute crisis management over proactive, relational help.
- ▶ **Loss of vital roles and workforce instability:** Short-term and insecure funding cycles drive high staff turnover and the loss of experienced practitioners, particularly impacting third-sector partners and non-statutory family support roles.
- ▶ **Training gaps and reduced practice-based learning:** A shift towards classroom and online training has reduced opportunities for practice-based learning, peer networking, and cross-sector training, leaving some practitioners lacking confidence to address emerging needs without over-escalating.
- ▶ **Fragmented collaboration and loss of co-location:** Operational collaboration relies heavily on informal personal relationships rather than systemised processes, while the post-pandemic loss of shared physical bases has weakened daily communication and cross-agency role clarity.

Recommendation 4: Develop a sustainable and capable workforce

Scottish Government must

Ensure short- and long-term capacity and sustainability of the workforce

- **Develop a long-term workforce strategy for early childhood:** This should consider headcount, retention, pay, progression, and workload-reducing technology across health, children's services, and ELC.
- **Invest in critical roles:** Fund national training and recruitment to address shortages in midwifery, health visiting, speech and language therapy, and ELC.

Enhance support to develop the skills and capabilities of the workforce

- **Standardise core competencies:** Create a high-quality, cross-sector learning framework to embed essential early childhood knowledge into workforce training.
- **Enhance core curricula:** Partner with education providers, regulators, and royal colleges to embed infant mental health, attachment theory, neurodiversity, and preventative practice across professional training.
- **Expand practical training:** Work with development bodies like Public Service Delivery Scotland to significantly boost hands-on, practical training for both students and current practitioners.

Theme 5: Data and operational infrastructure

What would good look like?



Enabling data and operational infrastructure: Operational systems and processes work in a way that minimise administrative burden and improve organisations' ability to strategically plan and coordinate services around the family.

"In this technological world that we live in, surely there could be a straightforward data infrastructure system that could be utilised across the partnership."

Interview participant

What are the current challenges?

- ▶ **Unlinked and fragmented datasets:** Systems and data platforms across agencies and at a national level are disconnected, increasing administrative burdens on practitioners and preventing a cohesive, system-wide view of family needs.
- ▶ **Limited use of data for improvement:** Although vast amounts of data are routinely collected, they are more often used for reporting and accountability purposes than applied to drive service planning and improvement.
- ▶ **Staff skills, capacity and confidence gaps:** Practitioners often lack the data literacy, confidence and dedicated time required to interpret information and apply insights effectively in preventative, relationship-based work.
- ▶ **Governance and risk tolerance barriers:** Rigid institutional governance structures and varying levels of risk tolerance inhibit safe data sharing, cross-agency collaboration, and innovative local testing.

Recommendation 5: Develop seamless data infrastructure and guidance that enables best practice

Scottish Government must

Develop seamless national data infrastructure and guidance that enables best practice

- **Issue procurement guidance:** Establish minimum standards for data and client systems, focusing on interoperability, data sovereignty, user testing with frontline staff, and AI guardrails.
- **Enable cross-sector data linkage:** Mandate shared standards and operational rules to link child identifiers across health, education and social care.
- **Standardise local data sharing:** Develop guidance to streamline local data collection and build practitioner confidence around legal, safe information sharing.
- **Digitise administrative processes:** Reduce local paperwork burden by introducing streamlined digital options.
- **Launch a national data portal:** Establish a single children and families portal giving local areas easy access to cross-sector population data at the lowest geographical level.
- **Simplify reporting:** Review data upload requirements to enforce a 'write once, share once' approach for local areas.

Support local capacity and build confidence to engage with data

- **Build local data confidence:** Create a national learning programme to help frontline staff and leaders comfortably use population and individual data for planning and decision-making.
- **Enhance technical analytics:** Boost advanced analytical capacity via a centralised specialist team or creative partnerships (for example, matching post-graduate and PhD researchers with local areas for targeted data projects).

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