

Strengthening Scotland's Partnership with the Third Sector

Scottish Government Debate, June 2026

Children First is Scotland's national children's charity. We stand up for children, keep them safe and support them to recover from trauma and abuse through our national and local services.

The third (or charity) sector is, and has always been, vital to the delivery of public services and supporting children and families.

Children First's own history reflects this enduring role. Our organisation emerged at a time when there were no statutory systems to protect children. Our [archives](#) tell a story of how, in the absence of any other support, civil society stepped in to protect the most vulnerable children and laid the foundations for the statutory social work support system that exists today.

Scotland's charity sector has a long history of innovation, which continues today.

Our services are rooted in communities and, inspired by the experiences and views of the families we support, continue to inspire national practice and policy today.

- After campaigning to radically reform Scotland's justice system for children, Children First opened Scotland's first **Bairns Hoose** in 2023. This set the good practice basis for the national roll out and now delivers a multi-agency child-centred support focussing on long-term recovery.
- Our **whole family support** services have demonstrated an effective alternative way to support **children's mental health**, bridging the gap between GPs and CAMHS. One service reduced the number of children repeatedly visiting their GP for mental health support by 86%.
- Our national **Support Line** offers early help and preventative support, through compassionate help and advice to anyone worried about a child. In 2025 we worked with nearly 1,500 families to provide financial wellbeing support and advice that helped put £1.8 million in financial gains back in their pockets and manage over £1 million pounds in debts.

But many of these services are at risk.

For many children and families today, charities offer their only source of support and connection. Without these services supporting families, the public sector would face overwhelming demand. But at a time when children and families are relying on our services more than ever, the sector is also at its most vulnerable as charitable giving declines and costs increase. The sector needs support.

What's needed?

The most effective support for families happens when public services and the charities work as equal partners. The Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament must recognise this, and commit to shared decision making, mutual respect and sustainable funding.

Scotland's first Bairns Hoose

“A year ago, I had no confidence and no hope. Now, I feel proud of myself. I’ve found purpose. Bairns Hoose is more than just support - it’s someone walking beside you through the hardest times. It’s a second home, a safety blanket and a reminder that you’re never alone.” Evangeline, young person.

For decades, we have worked alongside children and their families who are survivors of abuse, trauma and other adversities, to support them through their justice, care and protection journeys and to recover from their experience. We have been repeatedly told by children and families that the experiences of the care and justice systems built to protect them are worse than their experience of harm itself. Delays to justice mean that uncertainty hangs over families and disrupts their lives for years.

The problem isn't just that these systems create new trauma and make harm that has already happened worse – it's also incredibly inefficient.

The Barnahus model is a well-known approach where children and young people are interviewed, offered health assessment and supported in their recovery, all in one place by the right professionals. Children First have been campaigning to bring this model to Scotland for decades.

In April 2020, thanks to an award from the Postcode Lottery, Children First led a partnership with Victim Support Scotland, Children England and the University of Edinburgh to create Scotland's first Bairns Hoose in North Strathclyde, which was opened in 2023.

The Bairns Hoose facilitates the gathering of high quality, pre-recorded evidence that can be used in court, so that the number of times children must tell their story can be reduced as far as possible. It has high-quality technical facilities, including space to record evidence, and to deliver live links to court. This should remove the need for children to attend court at all. Children First provide advocacy and recovery support to children and their families.

We are now working to support Bairns Hoose partnerships across Scotland. In 2025 Children First Bairns Hoose services across Scotland supported 1,155 children and 516 families.

Whole Family Support and Children's Mental Health

Scotland's mental health system is not working for children and families. [Children First research](#) found that around 100 children are being referred to CAMHS every day. The scale of demand for children's mental health services now far outstretches capacity for support. Many are looking for help but struggling to find it. For too many children, their experience of mental health support is a waiting list which sometimes leads to diagnosis but very little direct support.

Children First's Family Wellbeing Service shows the effectiveness of community-based, whole-family support and its potential to transform Scotland's overstretched mental health services for children and families. The service was developed by Children First in partnership with East Renfrewshire HSCP with funding from the Robertson Trust, offering whole family support to children looking for help with their mental health, but facing a lengthy wait for a diagnosis or CAMHS support.

Initially developed as a referral option for GPs, the service quickly connects children and families with a dedicated worker to listen and offer support. An [independent evaluation](#) found that the service:

- **Improved mental wellbeing** in children and their families, and strengthened **family relationships**, communication and confidence.
- Offered practical **support for neurodiverse children**, improving their daily lives.
- **Improved educational engagement**, helping children successfully return or transition to education.
- Had a significant systemic impact, **reducing pressure on both GPs and CAMHS**.

Lucy's Story

“One of the young people interviewed, Lucy, expressed her frustration at the start of the support at not being able to access the “happy” lives she felt others were having because of her autism and not being understood by others. She said: *“At that time I wanted any kind of help. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. When you see teenagers all having fun in films and on TV and I didn’t feel that way. I just wanted to be seen”*.”

Her mother, Aileen said it was good that the Family Wellbeing Service had taken the time to build trust with Lucy and learn about each person in the family before beginning the sessions. They felt this was the reason Lucy had started to open up and was not “masking” in the sessions. She had also participated in the young people’s group Children First had set up, helping to break isolation and raise confidence.

“The worker also set up a group for the kids, and that got Lucy to meet someone in the same position as her (who has autism). That was my big thing about forcing her to go to school but she didn’t have close friends. She never had these close friends who were always going to be there for her. When she stopped going to school, I wasn’t worried about her education because she is smart. But it was the social isolation”.”

Aileen reported that her daughter was no longer prescribed antidepressants and was about to begin a college course. The worker had also supported and encouraged Lucy to travel to the shopping centre independently taking two buses which was building her confidence. Lucy’s mother said that before engaging with the service her daughter did not leave the house. The worker helped her to build her confidence and went on the route with her to help know what she should do and where to go.

Lucy saw the transformation in herself, as she said: *“I think if you saw me a year ago and now. You would think I was a completely different person”*. Lucy added that without the service: *“I don’t think good things would have happened. Before I met my worker I wasn’t getting into a better place as I wasn’t accepting help. I don’t think I would be here without it”*.

Lucy had also been connected by Children First into volunteering and was supporting her to complete her PVG to work in a care home. She said she was “excited” to do this and would “love” to work in this field.”

Family Wellbeing Service Model Evaluation Report July 2025

Children First Support Line

“The Children First support line is a lifeline we wish we had known about sooner.” Support line caller

Children and families tell us that they feel alone. Children First found that 85% of parents and carers do not know where to turn to for help. 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 absent,² and children and families face new risks with cybercrime doubling in recent years.³

Families need emotional, practical, and financial support and, most importantly, consistent relationships with people they trust. But Scotland is stuck in a crisis response.

Our support line provides a lifeline to children and families across Scotland. From mental health, money worries and online harm to struggles at school our support line offers practical, emotional and financial help to families when they need it most.

In the past year, our support line saw calls sharply increase by more than 50% as more parents and carers turned to us for help when facing challenges bringing up children.

We worked with nearly 1,500 families to provide financial wellbeing support and advice that helped put £1.8 million in financial gains back in their pockets and manage over £1 million pounds in debts.

If you have any questions, or would like to set up a meeting to talk about Children First's work, please contact Lily.Humphreys@childrenfirst.org.uk.

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).