

A manifesto for babies in Scotland



The challenge we face

Babies depend on sensitive, responsive care to grow and develop healthily. But many do not get the nurturing care they need. More than one in ten babies in the UK today are living in fear, confusion and distress.ⁱ That's more than 9,000 babies in Scotland.

9,000+

babies in Scotland are living in fear and distress.



Not everyone bonds easily with their baby. Parents can be overwhelmed by trauma from their own childhood. Some are struggling with mental or physical health difficulties. Domestic abuse, insecure housing and the impacts of poverty are just some of the stressors that can disrupt parent-infant relationships. Whatever the root cause, we have a shared responsibility to help.

A baby's brain develops rapidly during pregnancy and through the first two years of life. What happens during this time not only affects them in the moment, but it also lays the foundations for future health and happiness. Inequality begins before birth and continues throughout life.

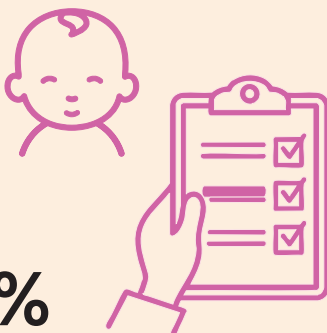
We know what harms babies and what enables them to thrive, but we are still failing to give all babies the best start in life.

Babies' developmental needs are increasing

Health visitors reported

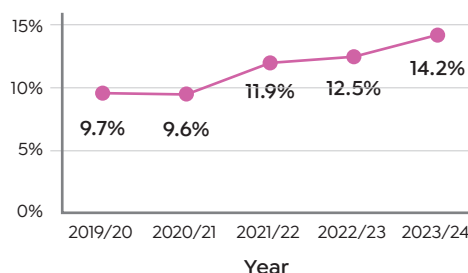
9.7%

of all babies in Scotland had at least one developmental concern in 2019/20.



By 2023/4 this had increased to **14.2%**

% of babies with a developmental concern at 13-15 months



Inequality is visible in toddlers' development

17% of all children in Scotland are identified as having a developmental concern at their 27-30-month health visitor check.



This rises to **25%** amongst babies living in low-income households.



i. [Start for Life Programme Guide](#). ii. [Early child development statistics Scotland 23-24](#).

What policies in Scotland try to address this?



Early intervention and support can reduce harm now and improve future outcomes across a range of areas – mental health, education outcomes, even a baby's future earning potential can be improved.

The 2018 to 2019 Programme for Government included a commitment to improving perinatal and infant mental health, overseen by a Perinatal and Infant Mental Health Programme Board. The Programme Board ended in 2023, but despite an ongoing funding commitment to these specialist services, there are challenges in many parts of Scotland, and provision remains low.

Only a small proportion of vulnerable babies and parents who are struggling to bond and respond to their babies' needs, can access these services.

The policy landscape affecting babies is fragmented with a range of early years policies spread across different government directorates.

Perinatal and infant mental health services are overseen by a different government directorate from other early years policies. These include Whole Family Wellbeing, Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), Better Start, Health Visiting, Children's Rights and the Promise.

We welcomed the Early Child Development Transformational Change programme, but 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.

Scotland is in a unique position, having incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into law in 2024. This means public bodies must consider and respect children's rights, including babies' rights. The UNCRC provides a framework for embedding a children's human rights approach across public services. However, babies are more likely to be overlooked, because they rely on adults for their voice to be heard and considered and their rights to be realised.



What more do babies need?

Babies need consistent, loving care from at least one parent or primary caregiver, and parents need the right support, and environment to provide this. Sometimes parents will need intensive support to be the parents they want to be.

Families with a child under one are one of the Scottish Government's priority groups for tackling child poverty. They are at a particular higher risk of poverty – 35% of children in families with a child under one live in relative poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ

The current focus is on:

- support for families in early parenting to foster development of strong attachment and parent-child relationships
- boosting income and reducing social isolation
- high quality mental health care and reducing barriers to accessing that care.

However, strategic leadership, across all levels of Government is needed in order to:

- focus on eradicating child poverty
- drive investment in prevention and early intervention
- increase provision of both whole-family support (including housing and financial inclusion support), relationship-focused support and specialist mental health services, and ensure these are linked. This echoes calls from other third sector organisations. (*Save the Children Supporting Families for Better Childhoods. The role of Whole Family Support in tackling child poverty in the early years.*)

We hope that all political parties will place babies at the heart of their agenda.

This Manifesto for Babies in Scotland has been created by a coalition of charities working to support the rights and wellbeing of babies. With the coming Scottish election in May 2026, we urge every parliamentary candidate to consider these recommendations and calls to action.

Early intervention is cost-effective, and more investment is needed to address growing need. Supporting babies' wellbeing, rights and participation in decision making is both the right thing and the smart thing to do.

We need you to speak up for babies in Scotland!



iii. [Understanding health outcomes experiencing poverty early years evidence review.](#)

Recommendation 1

A cross-government strategy for babies.

- Develop a cross-government strategy to join up policy around babies' emotional wellbeing, developmental needs, rights and participation. Ensure policies focus on eradicating poverty affecting families with a baby. This could be part of a wider early years strategy but would recognise the unique vulnerability and needs of babies.

The strategy would join up sectors, champion what policies supporting wellbeing and participation of babies should look like "in the real world" and support implementation and scaling. The strategy must be adequately resourced and drive delivery in statutory and third sector services.



Recommendation 2

Invest in integrated whole family support so that families can access the right support, in the right place, at the right time in their community.

- Expand and scale up whole family support pilots that are working well, such as [Open Kindergarten](#) and [Home-Start Hubs](#). Provide multi-year funding for evidence-based practice and interventions (e.g. from [Sure Start](#) and Family Hubs) and link these to implementation of [the maternity pathway](#).
- Co-produce and evaluate family support models with babies and families, informed by the [Voice of the Infant: best practice guidelines and infant pledge](#).
- Ensure that support to access benefits people are entitled to, is embedded in these models, and enhance support for families with a baby e.g. targeted social security increases using

the existing mechanism of Best Start Grant and Best Start Food ([as recommended by Save the Children](#)). Services should support babies' rights, both in terms of parental responsibilities and state assistance (UNCRC article 18) and adequate standard of living (UNCRC article 27).

- Join up and link whole-family support and relationship-focused, therapeutic support for babies and care givers so there is a smooth pathway for babies and families in complex situations, where different agencies are involved, and more intensive support is needed. For example, [Aberlour Mother and Child Recovery House](#).



“ Esme, a Nigerian woman recently arrived in Edinburgh, visited a Home-Start Edinburgh drop-in session with her two-year-old son Paul. As a single parent, she initially sought to build her social connections. As staff built trust with Esme and Paul, they learnt that she was experiencing depression and financial hardship, and that Paul rarely spoke, preferring to play alone, and he often resisted leaving the house.

Worried that he wasn't meeting developmental milestones, she longed for connection and guidance. Support from Citizen's Advice Edinburgh helped her access additional benefits and NHS Lothian's Nursery Nurse provided a route for Paul to be further assessed.

When the Circle of Security programme was introduced, Esme was curious but cautious. Staff took time to explain the approach — how it could strengthen her bond with her

son and nurture his confidence. After taking time to reflect, she chose to join. The group was co-delivered by NHS Lothian's Infant Mental Health team PAIRS and Home-Start Edinburgh, and having an existing relationship made it easier for her to engage. From the first session, she felt truly listened to and valued.

Through Circle of Security, she began to understand her child's needs and her own emotional responses. Their relationship grew warmer and more responsive. Esme said of her experience "I now feel seen as a parent, and know more about how I can help Paul grow up". ”



“ I started going to Open Kindergarten with my son when he was about 4 months old. I was new to the area and didn't know many people especially people with children and felt a bit isolated after having a baby and my partner being at work during the day.

It can be quite daunting to go somewhere where you don't know anyone, and when you don't feel comfortable with yourself, and your confidence is low. But I can honestly say that I have found the kindergarten to be very welcoming, and non-judgemental.

During my time attending the group I met a lot of other parents, and children, and have gained so much confidence, as well as friendships. This has not only helped myself but also my son, because it has helped him to learn to share and mix with other children.

The staff of the Kindergarten have always been great and encouraging, they have been resourceful and helpful. Due to being at the group, it led me to find out about courses which I could attend which again has really helped me.

There has always been a good vibe to the group and never any pressure to attend each week, or give any reason as to why you couldn't go. I would really encourage anyone to attend. ”

Parent supported by Open Kindergarten



Recommendation 3

Invest in infant mental health services that support babies living in fear and distress.

- Uphold babies' rights to the highest attainable standard of healthcare (article 24 UNCRC), developing to their full potential (article 6 UNCRC) and recovery from trauma (article 39 UNCRC). This includes the creation of an Infant Mental Health Service Specification, so that babies in all health boards can access services like Glasgow's Wee Minds Matter.
- Review funding of specialist infant mental health provision and scale up models that work, such as Infant Mental Health Teams^{iv}, to ensure all babies in Scotland can access specialist support when they need it.



“ The person from Wee Minds Matter was very welcoming and made you feel comfortable. She was so approachable, and I would have her here in a heartbeat.

I found it helpful have something to work towards. My goal was to progress my bond with my wee girl. Before doing the Circle of Security work I had been scared to talk honestly about my mental health in case social work might get involved.

I think the work with Wee Minds Matter changed my feelings towards my baby and I was more able to support her confidence to explore her world. I felt confident that she'd be OK and still need her mum if I was away from her. If she could speak, I think she'd say "my mum and dad trust me more to let me explore safely. I trust my mum and dad and they trust me."

The support from Wee Minds Matter was a great experience. It made me more able to understand my baby's feelings and her world. We have really developed as a family. ”

Mum whose baby received a Newborn Behavioural Observation (NBO) and play sessions. Circle of Security Parenting (COSP) was delivered to both parents in the family home.

NHS
Greater Glasgow
and Clyde

iv. www.gov.scot.

Recommendation 4

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 (e.g. midwives, health visitors, nursery staff) on topics including:
 - Parental engagement and play
 - Voice of the baby
 - Noticing and observing distress in babies
 - Financial support and advice
- Protect core funding and provide sustainable, multi-year funding to support delivery of therapeutic interventions by statutory services and the third sector. Recognise the third-sector's role in delivering essential mental health support.
- Support health visitors to identify emotional distress in babies as part of Early Child Development reviews and referral to appropriate support. This should include full delivery of the [Family Nurse Partnership Programme](#) to provide additional support to young first-time parents. This should be linked to the recommendations of the [Health Visiting Plan Action Plan](#) and part of the NHS Education for Scotland training offer to statutory and third sector practitioners.



Recommendation 5

Keep the Promise to babies.

- Ensure specialist infant and perinatal mental health services (like Glasgow's [Infant and Family Team](#), supported by NSPCC Scotland) are available to all families facing complex challenges and adversity. This supports the aspiration that families should stay together wherever possible.
- 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.

