

The Children in Scotland Manifesto for 2026 elections

Being brave in the face of difficult choices





Introduction

Welcome to our manifesto. Thanks to everyone who has helped shape it – our members; the children and young people we have worked with over the last five years; our brilliant staff; and the wider community of people working with and for babies, children and young people across Scotland. While some of the calls are distinct from our last manifesto, unsurprisingly there is still a lot of work to do in some areas and therefore we include calls that are being carried forward.

When writing a manifesto, the focus is on ‘must do better’. However, it is important to recognise the good. We have a positive policy context. GIRFEC will be celebrating its 20th birthday in 2026; we have incorporated the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC); we have statutory child poverty targets; and we have a commitment to whole family support. We know a lot about what we have to do to make things better, and we have the policy framework. The real challenge is how to translate that into changes on the ground.

Incorporation of the UNCRC has created a massive opportunity in Scotland. However, we need to move faster towards realising its potential. We are still too far from realising the rights of many children. We need to get better at ensuring support reaches the groups of children who are furthest from their rights, and in particular focus on those children whose challenges are greater because they sit in several of these marginalised groups at once.

We are called Children in Scotland for a reason. We were formed 30 years ago to focus on improving policy and practice across Scotland on issues relating to children. However, we are embedded in a wider network of organisations working across the world. And it feels right to situate this manifesto in the wider context.

In November 2024 [I wrote a blog for World Children’s Day](#) that focused on how children’s rights were being denied through conflict, food insecurity, famine and disease in Palestine, Sudan, Ukraine, Yemen and Haiti. Not an exhaustive list by any stretch. Throughout the ensuing year, things have not improved as the pictures coming out of Palestine and Sudan have bleakly shown

us. We would ask our government to be brave in the face of such unacceptable situations and where they have a voice, seek to use that voice to protect the rights of children across the world.

And here at home, we are watching with dismay the anti-migration and wider discriminatory rhetoric and violence that is creating a hostile environment for many of our children, families and communities. These are not random incidents, but the attempt by some to use their power to foster division. This must be strongly resisted by all of us – whether policy makers; duty bearers; or organisations like ours working to make Scotland a better place for our children.

And finally, leadership on climate change is crucial. Children across the world are already feeling the impacts of climate change. They are concerned and know that they are facing a future where these challenges can only increase. We would ask our government to lead in this area, ensuring progress here in Scotland, and use its voice wherever possible to push for action that improves the lives of babies, children, young people and their families.

Dr Judith Turbyne,
Chief Executive





Child poverty

The Scottish Government has committed to reducing child poverty rates to below 10% by 2030. However, at present more than one in five children currently live in poverty and children are experiencing poverty at a higher rate than both working age adults and pensioners in Scotland.¹ To fulfil this commitment to reducing child poverty, there needs to be an approach which recognises the intersecting challenges faced by families at the highest risk of

poverty, particularly women's poverty. Interventions need to encompass a range of measures which both get money directly to families, and tackle the factors that drive poverty.

Children in Scotland is a member of the End Child Poverty Coalition. We endorse **all** the calls to the Scottish Government made by the Coalition, in particular those calls highlighted opposite.



“ Well I think if all your friends or people you know go to the after school clubs, school trips, that kind of isolates you from them. You are singled out, you're not with them, just a spare person ”

Young Person involved in Child Poverty Action Group's Cost of the School Day Project



We call on the Scottish Government to:

1. **An immediate increase to the Scottish Child Payment to at least £40 per week, rising to £55 by the end of the next parliament.**
2. **Improve employment opportunities for parents. This must include action to support parents – especially mothers – to enter, sustain and progress in work alongside action to drive improvements in the quality of work and to ensure it is family friendly and flexible around childcare.**
3. **Invest in social housing to ensure all children live in safe, secure and affordable homes.**

¹ Scotland's Population Health Framework 2025-2035



Children's Rights

With the incorporation of UNCRC in 2024, Scottish children's rights are protected by world-leading legislation. However, there continues to be some marginalised groups of children who experience a range of inequalities and whose rights are least likely to be realised.² All of these groups face barriers towards enjoyment of their rights, and in many cases, increasing discrimination. A child's rights are less likely to be realised if they sit in several of these groups at the same time.

“ This is a chance to address the rights issues impacting children and young people and create a culture where their rights and meaningful participation are at the forefront of decision making”

Ellie Craig MSYP





We call on the Scottish Government to:

1. **Show continued leadership on upholding UNCRC incorporation** by investing in rights-based policy and in the development of the workforce with the training and resources needed to understand and fulfil their responsibilities under this Act.
2. **Advocate for UNCRC incorporation by the UK Government, and devolved administrations.**
3. **Raise the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility to 16.**
4. **Work towards extending the access to independent advocacy and views gathering processes to all children who are covered by the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004.** The extension should include all children regardless of how they communicate to align with UNCRC's Article 12 and General Comment 12.

² Please see Appendix on page 15 for an example list



Education and development

Education is a rights multiplier: it is a foundation on which babies, children, and young people can build to access other rights. Education goes far beyond what happens in the classroom and begins before birth. Midwives, health visitors, childcare providers, teaching assistants, teachers, and youth workers are all part of the system in which Scotland's babies, children, and young people develop and learn.

There has been significant activity across Scottish public policy to support the wider landscape that underpins children's

education and development. This has included the expansion of early learning and childcare, the independent review of additional support for learning, as well as a series of independent reviews to support education reform. However, there continues to be significant challenges in delivering these and we know that some distinct groups of children face significantly more intersecting barriers to their right to education.



“If we are listened to, there will be more trust and respect between students and teachers, and we would be more engaged and listen more”

Member of Inclusion Ambassadors

We call on the Scottish Government to:

1. **Invest in delivery of early learning and childcare** to have a positive impact on areas of known challenges, to support better outcomes for **all** children, young people and families.

[Read our call on Whole Family Support >](#)

2. **Fully value and resource the workforce to ensure parity of esteem across all roles who contribute to educational outcomes.** This requires all elements of the workforce to be fully integrated within the education system, with clarity over remits and roles, and the provision of appropriate training, support and supervision.

3. **Continue to increase investment in specialist provision for children with additional support needs.** For example, support for learning teachers, speech and language therapists and educational psychologists.

4. **Continue to deliver the Scottish Government's programme of education reform,** with a renewed focus on the recommendations of the Independent Review of Qualifications and Assessments, The National Discussion on Education and Ken Muir's Review.

5. **Deliver a renewed Additional Support for Learning Action Plan** which aims to realise the **Inclusion Ambassadors Vision Statement**. This plan should have an increased focus on access to specialist support, resolving issues around placement decisions and greater connection to ongoing work around attendance; and behaviour and relationships.





Health and wellbeing

Scotland's children continue to face significant and persistent health inequalities in both their mental and physical health.

These inequalities are driven by wider inequalities in society and are often closely linked to socioeconomic status and other structural factors. We know **our calls to tackle child poverty** would have significant impact on health and wellbeing. The World Health Organisation identifies that young people are especially at risk from the commercial determinants of health such as marketing and promotion.³

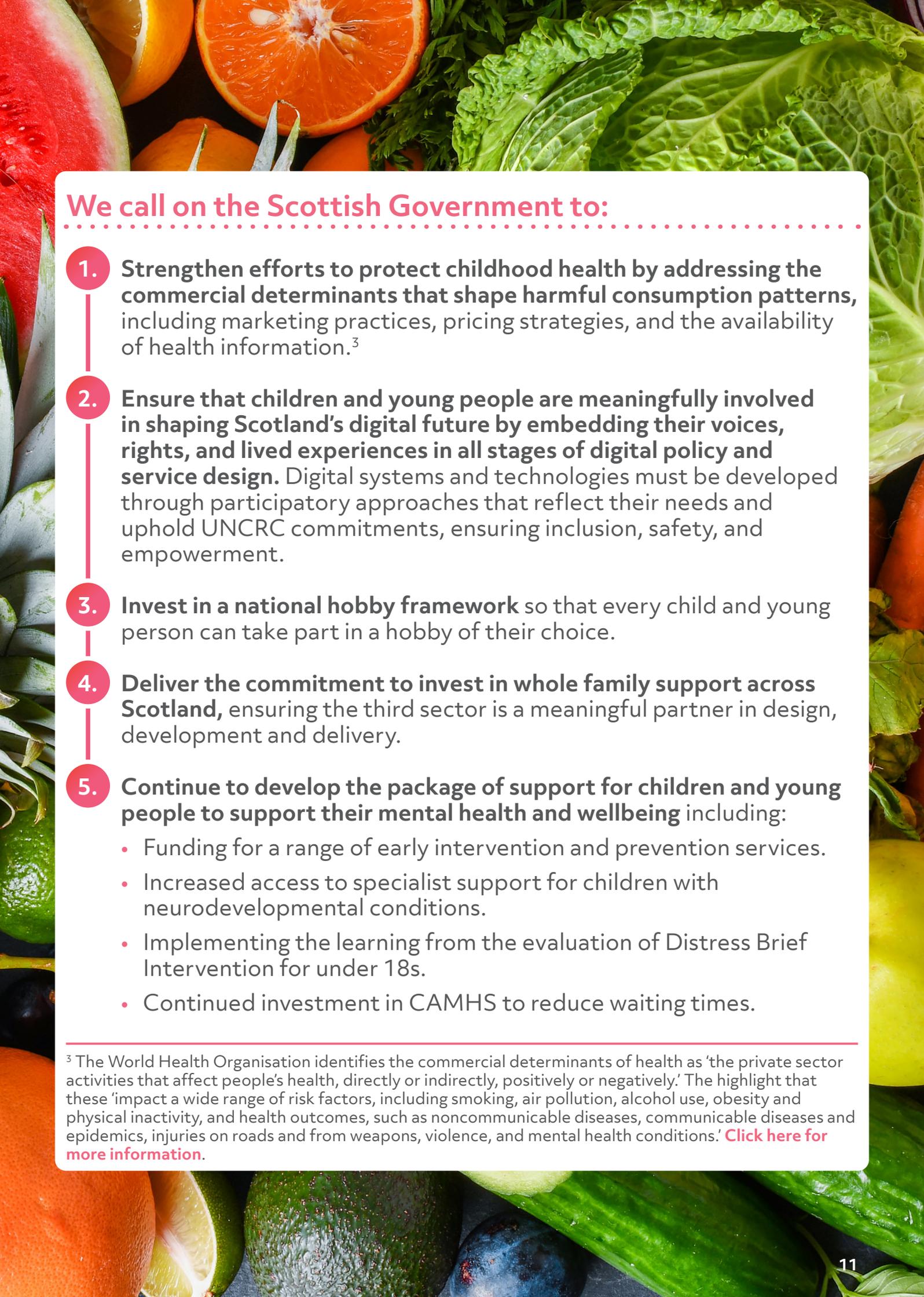
As more people live significant parts of their lives online, the digital environment offers great opportunities but also presents real risks. Without the right support and awareness to navigate these spaces safely and fairly, digital participation can deepen existing health and social inequalities – particularly when wellbeing and rights are not actively safeguarded.

We also know that there continues to be significant pressure on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), with a recognition of the need for a move to early intervention and prevention approaches.



**“
They have childish
flavours and are always
adding new ones which
means young people try
them and spend more
money on them”**

Member of Changing our World



We call on the Scottish Government to:

- 1. Strengthen efforts to protect childhood health by addressing the commercial determinants that shape harmful consumption patterns, including marketing practices, pricing strategies, and the availability of health information.³**
- 2. Ensure that children and young people are meaningfully involved in shaping Scotland's digital future by embedding their voices, rights, and lived experiences in all stages of digital policy and service design.** Digital systems and technologies must be developed through participatory approaches that reflect their needs and uphold UNCRC commitments, ensuring inclusion, safety, and empowerment.
- 3. Invest in a national hobby framework** so that every child and young person can take part in a hobby of their choice.
- 4. Deliver the commitment to invest in whole family support across Scotland,** ensuring the third sector is a meaningful partner in design, development and delivery.
- 5. Continue to develop the package of support for children and young people to support their mental health and wellbeing** including:
 - Funding for a range of early intervention and prevention services.
 - Increased access to specialist support for children with neurodevelopmental conditions.
 - Implementing the learning from the evaluation of Distress Brief Intervention for under 18s.
 - Continued investment in CAMHS to reduce waiting times.

³ The World Health Organisation identifies the commercial determinants of health as 'the private sector activities that affect people's health, directly or indirectly, positively or negatively.' The highlight that these 'impact a wide range of risk factors, including smoking, air pollution, alcohol use, obesity and physical inactivity, and health outcomes, such as noncommunicable diseases, communicable diseases and epidemics, injuries on roads and from weapons, violence, and mental health conditions.' [Click here for more information.](#)



Planning and resources

Scotland has world-leading legislation on a range of children's rights issues: GIRFEC, The Promise, and UNCRC incorporation are the pillars of this legislative and policy context. However, there is a significant implementation gap.

There is significant focus on public service reform in Scotland, with the aim of tackling this gap. There is wide recognition of the need for systemic change to improve outcomes for children and families.

The third sector is an essential partner in the delivery of these commitments. More meaningful integration of the third sector into public service delivery will help ensure children and families have access to the right support. Furthermore, fair funding will enable the third sector to plan ahead and to make the most efficient use of limited resources to deliver on Scotland's promises and obligations to its children.



“The longer-term funding allows us to give better value for money as we can plan long term, employ staff on more secure contracts, and utilise them more efficiently”

Registered charity, SCVO Briefing:
Programme for Government

We call on the Scottish Government to:

- 1. Increased urgency of the Scottish Government's commitment to funding the third sector more fairly.** This should follow SCVO's fair funding principles:
 - Multi-year funding.
 - Flexible and where possible unrestricted and/or core funding.
 - Sustainable funding that includes inflation-based uplifts and that allows for paying staff the Real Living Wage.
 - Accessible, streamlined, proportionate, and consistent approaches to applications and reporting, including timely processing.
 - Transparency around grant funding.⁴
- 2. Keep the focus and commitment towards delivery of The Promise –** This will require an appropriately resourced approach and bravery in implementing the changes that are required.
- 3. Meaningfully deliver public service reform in Scotland by** focusing on:
 - Ethical commissioning within local and national government which encourages collaboration.
 - Legislating to support more streamlined approaches to local authority governance.
 - Collaborative leadership at local and national level.
 - Fully embedding third sector partners into local authority planning.
- 4. Ensure that workforce development and support are fully embedded within Scotland's refreshed digital strategy.** This includes equipping the children's sector workforce with the confidence, skills, and resources to embrace digital innovation in service delivery, professional learning, and support systems. Investment in digital capability must be sustained and aligned with Scotland's wider vision for inclusive access, lifelong learning, and public service transformation.

⁴ All from 'Fair Funding' section of [SCVO's 2026 Scottish Parliament election manifesto – SCVO](#)



A

Appendix

Distinct groups of children whose rights are least likely to be fully realised

- **Care experienced / looked after children and care leavers**
Consistently worse outcomes (education, stability, mental health, permanence delays) and frequently excluded from decision-making that affects them.
- **Disabled children and young people (including those with complex support needs)**
Face barriers to education, health, respite, and reasonable adjustments; their rights are repeatedly highlighted as unmet.
- **Asylum-seeking, refugee and unaccompanied children**
Need special protection, face legal/benefits/access barriers, and uneven access to services and guardianship.
- **Children living in poverty / in the most deprived areas**
Poverty underpins many rights gaps (nutrition, housing, transport, participation, education).
- **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children**
Long-standing exclusion, barriers to education/housing and specific cultural rights issues; recently targeted by a government action plan because of persistent poor outcomes.
- **LGBTQ+ young people (including trans and non-binary youth)**
Disproportionately affected by stigma, bullying, poorer mental health and variable access to appropriate services.
- **Young carers**
Unpaid caring duties limit education, leisure and participation; many don't self-identify or get support.
- **Children in the justice system / on the edge of care and criminalisation**
Face barriers to fair treatment, diversion and rehabilitation that respect their rights.
- **Homeless or unstably housed young people / those in temporary accommodation**
Housing instability disrupts education, health and family life.
- **Children in rural and remote areas**
Access gaps (transport, specialist services, digital exclusion) that reduce real access to rights enjoyed by urban peers.

NB – This list is not exhaustive but signifies the breadth of distinct groups experiencing singular or intersecting barriers towards rights realisation.



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