



Supporting the
Third Sector Project



Reflecting on 20 years of Getting It Right for Every Child Implementation

March 2026



Background

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) is the Scottish Government's national approach to improving outcomes for children, young people, and their families. It is founded on a commitment to providing the right support at the right time, enabling every child and young person in Scotland to reach their full potential. Acting as both an approach and a framework, GIRFEC is used across services to promote, support, and safeguard the wellbeing of children, young people, and their families. Previously services often worked in isolation which would lead to delays in support and inconsistencies. GIRFEC was designed to bring these services and the families they work with together to ensure no child was missed from support.

First introduced in 2006 following the publication of the GIRFEC Implementation Plan, the approach was informed by public consultation in 2005 and built on from the publication of the For Scotland's Children Report (2001). GIRFEC sits at the heart of Scotland's child-centred policy landscape, aligning with national commitments to uphold children's rights through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and prioritising early intervention and prevention to tackle child poverty. In 2014, the GIRFEC wellbeing indicators were embedded into law through the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act, further solidifying its role in Scotland's services and children's services planning. Since its introduction, GIRFEC has become firmly embedded in practice across Scotland, shaping how services work together with children, young people, and their families.



Purpose of this paper

As GIRFEC approaches its 20-year anniversary, Children in Scotland's Supporting the Third Sector Project reflects on how the third sector engages with GIRFEC, and on its experiences of GIRFEC implementation.

To inform this work, the project team engaged with members of the TSI Children's Services Network through an online meeting to discuss the third sector's experience of GIRFEC Implementation, highlighting examples of good practice and identifying what the sector needs to ensure GIRFEC's vision is reached over the next 20 years.





What is the Supporting the Third Sector Project?

The Supporting the Third Sector (STTS) Project supports Third Sector Interfaces (TSIs) and the wider third sector to play a meaningful and influential role in national planning and decision-making, with the aim of improving outcomes for children, young people and families. The STTS Project is funded by the Scottish Government and hosted by Children in Scotland. Through the STTS Project, we facilitate the TSI Children's Services Network, a national forum that brings together TSIs from across Scotland to share learning, strengthen connections and support effective engagement of the third sector in local and national planning and delivery.

We have taken a strengths-based approach to assessing the effectiveness of GIRFEC implementation in the third sector. This allows us to accurately reflect on the positive impact of GIRFEC on the third sector and children and families they support to understand what is working well and consider what we can learn from these successes to make improvements across all areas of implementation. In the spirit of reflection and to mark 20 years of GIRFEC this paper also outlines what the third sector needs to ensure implementation continues effectively over the next 20 years.

Following completion of the engagement activities informing this paper, the Scottish Government published its "Strengthening the Third Sector" statement (9 February 2026), announcing plans to develop a new Third Sector Partnership aimed at strengthening the sector's voice, supporting communities, and advancing fairer multi year funding arrangements.



Strengths

Enabling more child and family-centred approaches

Across all discussions, GIRFEC was consistently regarded as helping to enable a more holistic and child-centred approach to supporting children, young people and their families over the past 20 years.

Participants said that GIRFEC prompted a positive shift towards more wrap-around support for families, with services increasingly recognising the wider context of a child or young person's wellbeing. Several said that GIRFEC has helped establish a more collaborative culture of 'doing things with families' as opposed to a more paternalistic approach of 'doing things to' families. This has signalled an important shift towards doing things differently over the last 20 years that has helped to deliver better outcomes by empowering children and families to have their say in decisions made about their support.

Participants told us that this broader shift in approaches facilitated by GIRFEC has encouraged greater awareness and understanding of children's rights and autonomy, among both practitioners and children and young people themselves. The eight Wellbeing Indicators of Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected,

Responsible and Included (SHANARRI) and their close alignment with UNCRC were highlighted as a particular value of GIRFEC. The promotion of the indicators in education settings has encouraged a shared understanding and language between practitioners, adults and children and young people about their wellbeing and broader set of rights.

As part of this broader shift in approaches, participants we spoke to also highlighted that GIRFEC has contributed to increased awareness among children and young people of their rights and autonomy, particularly through the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators and their close alignment with the UNCRC. The third sector has played a key role in putting the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators into practice by providing safe spaces for children, young people and families in the community to meet with support services and workers. This has allowed support to be provided in the setting most comfortable to children and families and can support them to access any beneficial statutory services.



Third sector case study:

One of our Family Support Workers worked with a family whose child had not been attending school for the last two years of primary school and had recently been given a diagnosis of Autism and ADHD. They had also been receiving medical procedures which impacted their ability to attend school.

Our Family Support Worker led the emotional support offer to the child which was strengths-based, relationship-based and involved an active partnership with the child. The support was planned with close consideration to the SHANARRI wellbeing indicators, ensuring all aspects of the child's wellbeing were accounted for.

The Family Support Worker was also able to join the family at Team Around the Child Meetings with school where they were able to provide bespoke support to the child and their family. Without agreement from all relevant adults that the Family Support Worker's attendance at meetings would help fulfil the child's support in line with the SHANARRI indicators, the child and their family may have missed out on the support in the room at those meetings.

Beyond service delivery, we heard how a shift towards child and family-centred approaches has made room for children and young people to have their say on key statutory policies. We heard how children and young people with care experience working with a third sector organisation were supported to share their views on their local authority's corporate parenting policy.


Increased awareness of third sector's role in delivering positive outcomes

One key benefit identified was the increased awareness among statutory partners and the wider public of the crucial role played by the third sector in improving outcomes for children, young people and families. Across a range of service areas, we have heard how the third sector feels more valued by the public sector since implementation of GIRFEC and that their expertise as leaders of person-centred, innovative support for children and families is better recognised.

Our discussions with the third sector tell us that this increased awareness of the third sector's expertise has resulted in public sector taking a step back from aspects of family support delivery where it could be better delivered by the third sector. We heard that some local authority children's services planning groups recognised there was a limit to what social workers could do and that the third sector was best placed to provide strands of wrap around family support.

We were told that the role of Third Sector Interfaces as a conduit for the wider network of support services in a local authority area has been recognised by public sector partners. The holistic oversight that Third Sector Interfaces offers can provide a valuable alternative perspective to the focused and often siloed working in statutory children and families service provision.

GIRFEC implementation was viewed by those we spoke to as 'allowing' the public sector to make meaningful use of the third sector's specialist support. Several third sector organisations we spoke with said that recognition of their offer to support children and families had resulted in commissioned services and invitations to a range of strategic planning and delivery groups.

 **Third sector case study:**

The local authority had been aware of the work we had been doing in school counselling, working with schools to deliver support for learners across the area. This led them to reaching out to us to write the tender for school counselling service across the local authority and invited us to apply, our application was successful.

The school counselling work has been a really positive example of collaboration with the local authority, engaging us as experts in both service design and delivery.

I [leader of third sector organisation] have been involved in several of the local authority's GIRFEC strategic groups and delivery forums, alongside other third sector service delivery partners. These connections with the local authority feel solidified now, in no small part due to their recognition of what we offer to children and young people in the wider area".

Positive relationship building with the public sector

Building on the recognition of the value of the third sector for supporting positive outcomes for children and families, an additional strength of GIRFEC implementation has been the development of positive and cooperative relationships between third and public sector partners.

We heard from third sector colleagues that GIRFEC as a national policy approach has provided a shared language and common framework for interagency collaboration. This has helped to reduce barriers for cooperation between sectors providing opportunities to align work to meet shared aims. We heard third sector colleagues describe the shared language and interagency collaboration as the 'mandate' of GIRFEC.

Third sector interfaces and organisations we spoke to described examples where GIRFEC implementation had led to positive and productive relationships with local

authorities and the broader public sector. We were told that in some areas this has enabled the third sector to play a meaningful role in contributing to Child's Plans affording them 'a seat at the table' in planning wrap around support for children and families.

The inclusion of the third sector in formal Child's Plan meetings was said to have been particularly beneficial in identifying and planning for additional support needs and opportunities for children and families to engage with bespoke support services that might otherwise have been unknown to public sector staff. The positive relationships between public and third sector organisations facilitated by GIRFEC appears to have allowed for a greater maximisation of resources and expertise across local authority areas, helping to ensure children and families do not miss opportunities to engage with available support.



Third sector case study:

Our befriending service has a positive and constructive relationship with the local authority's education team. We receive regular referrals from education, youth work and social work teams to engage with young people struggling at school who we could support through our service.

We have built supportive relationships with a number of young people through the Befriending Project, and we're considered to be a key partner and stakeholder in the provision of wrap around support for children and young people in the area.

On some occasions we have been asked to attend Child Plan review meetings where, in collaboration with the young person and their family, we were able to share our perspective on what ongoing support may be beneficial to their wellbeing with discussions based around the SHANARRI indicators. On other occasions we had opportunities to support children and young people to share their views ahead of Child Plan reviews through the 'My Meeting' format.

There is a key role in Child's Plan meetings for third sector organisations who often have a more in-depth understanding of community-based support provision than our public sector colleagues. This is important to ensure that support for young people and families can extend to services like income maximisation or additional support and disability services.

I do believe that GIRFEC has led to more collaborative and trusting relationships between the public sector and the third sector by shifting the focus to be entirely on the child and their family. This has required us to work together across silos and share responsibility for improving outcomes for families.

GIRFEC has consistently underpinned strategic discussions through the Supporting the Third Sector Project's locality work. A range of areas have implemented the How Good Is Our Third Sector Participation in Children's Services Planning self-evaluation tool. This process brings statutory and third sector partners together to reflect on the role and contribution of the third sector within Children's Services Planning. These discussions focus on how localities can achieve the best outcomes for children, young people, and their families by identifying actions to strengthen systems and mechanisms for effective cross-sector collaboration, and by ensuring

that third sector organisations, and the voices of the children and young people they engage with daily, are meaningfully reflected in decision-making and the priorities of Children's Services Plans.



Opportunities for improvement

Working in equal partnership

While GIRFEC has strengthened relationships and partnership working in many areas, it was also noted that the quality of relationships and openness to sharing responsibility between the third sector and statutory partners continues to vary significantly by locality.

We heard from several third sector organisations across different localities that despite the positive relationships and partnerships they have seen facilitated by GIRFEC implementation, many important smaller third sector organisations were still being omitted from strategic discussions and supporting planning for children and families. They spoke about a tendency for statutory partners to work with national third sector organisations. This was said to leave potentially productive partnerships with smaller third sector organisations in the community unfounded.

Third sector colleagues we spoke to shared that partnerships with statutory bodies tended to be determined by funding and commissioning opportunities. This led to a feeling in many localities that partnerships with the public sector were only open to organisations who were commissioned or receiving funding from statutory bodies. We heard about occasions where productive partnerships with statutory services had been abandoned when short term funding for projects or services had ended.

Unequal partnerships between the public sector and third sector interfaces were also identified in relation to how Scottish Government funding was allocated within a locality. Staff from third sector interfaces said they were often consulted on where funding should be allocated within the community, but decisions were not made in partnership with the third sector. Given the third sector's often advanced knowledge of the community support landscape, this presents a missed opportunity to further embed GIRFEC and ensure a range of localised support is available for children and families.

This reflects findings from the STTS Project's 2023 and 2024 Annual Surveys, which highlight ongoing challenges in maintaining and developing effective relationships. These include power imbalances between sectors, high staff turnover, complex governance structures, and variation in the extent to which the third sector is represented within local governance and decision-making forums.

Reporting and evaluation on shared outcomes

The most consistent challenge that was discussed surrounded reporting and evaluation. We heard that sharing data across sectors and organisations continues to be challenging, limited new opportunities to identify emerging needs for children and families across localities. Colleagues we spoke to mentioned that the third and

public sector collects a range of data on children and families using diverse methods. This makes it challenging to align data both within organisations and across sectors. Moreover, confidentiality and GDPR considerations were mentioned as a barrier for sharing data and aligning evaluation.

The third sector collects a range of valuable data including lived experience and qualitative insights from children and families they support. We heard that the third sector often feels there is a lack of opportunities to share these insights with decision-makers in statutory bodies. They said they majority of data they share with statutory bodies related to reporting related to funding or commissioning work, as per their contractual obligations. The prioritisation of reporting and data collection for funding requirements can result in little remaining capacity within third sector organisations to collect additional data to report on strategic locality-wide measurements.

This is also consistent with the findings of the STTS Project on Children's Services Planning processes through our HGIO Self-evaluation work. It has been often recognised that the third sector gather valuable qualitative data. Despite this, the avenues to share this with the local authority are often limited or non-existent. Some areas reported difficulties in collecting third sector data due to the lack of a clear system or approach, while statutory data is still preferred due to better support systems for data collection. The STTS Project has also heard that in cases where data is asked for, the timelines provided are short and often information and data are not shared back with the third sector.

There is clear value in aligning data across sectors to support delivery of GIRFEC and improve outcomes for children and families. However, this does not yet appear to be taking place in the localities we engaged. Third sector colleagues told us that they recognise the potential of GIRFEC to provide the mandate for working more collaboratively across sectors to share data and report against agreed strategic priorities. There is a clear opportunity here for GIRFEC implementation to motivate a culture shift that commits statutory bodies to address administrative challenges with sharing data across sectors and to working collaboratively with the third sector to collect a fuller range of valuable data and insights.



What next for GIRFEC implementation?

This report has outlined the third sector's perspective on the positive practice and experiences since the initial implementation of GIRFEC in 2006. It has demonstrated where the third sector views the current strengths in implementation and areas where improvements could be made to provide better support and outcomes for children and families across Scotland.

As part of our engagement with the third sector to inform this report, we asked colleagues to consider what they need from national stakeholders and the wider public sector to further implement and realise the vision of GIRFEC over the next 20 years. Our discussions focused on actions and commitments stakeholder can make to ensure the third sector can operate to its maximum potential and deliver person-centred, innovative support for communities across Scotland.

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The most common theme discussed among third sector colleagues related to the need for enhanced funding and resources. There was a shared view among those we spoke to that current funding levels for implementing GIRFEC do not fully reflect the ambition set out when the national approach was introduced in 2006. Third sector colleagues acknowledged that shifting Scottish Government priorities in child and family support had diverted funds to different policy areas or to different funding streams. This led to third sector organisations feeling 'at the whim' of local authority and Scottish Government policy priorities, in part eroding the ethos of effective partnership working that GIRFEC sought to introduce.

The depletion of funding in key areas often left third sector organisations left to 'pick up' support provision when funding had been diverted by local authorities or other statutory bodies. We also heard that there has been an increased role for the third sector to play as children's and families' support needs have risen over the last year and thresholds for statutory duties get higher in part due to decreased funding and resource. This has resulted in further stretched capacity for many third sector organisations who are supporting children and families unable to access appropriate statutory support but with clear unmet needs.

Our engagements made clear that the third sector would value further central funding commitment from the Scottish Government to continue delivering the positive impact it has made for children and families. The sector also believes that the Scottish Government could more clearly communicate the value it places on the third sector by strengthening their language and rhetorical commitment in funding policies and frameworks. This could help establish more equitable and sustained funding streams for the third sector through local authority funding. We have outlined at the start of this paper that a Scottish Government announcement in February 2026 of a Third Sector Partnership outlined a renewed commitment to supporting and working with the third sector to address many of these issues and concerns from 2026.

Third sector colleagues also spoke about the fact that the 20th anniversary of GIRFEC indicates that the children and family's workforce across sectors is likely to be very different now to what it was when the policy approach was first introduced. We heard that the current third sector workforce have not had the same opportunity to engage with the levels of training and support offered to the workforce of 20 years ago in regard to the initial launch, and drive afforded to the aims and vision of GIRFEC.

Across all areas highlighted by third sector colleagues, there was agreement that the Scottish Government should harness the opportunity presented by the 20th anniversary of GIRFEC to renew its commitment to the third sector and its key role in the delivery of wrap-around support for children and families. They recognise that considerable strengths have emerged over the last 20 years with improved relationships, partnership working and the adoption of child-focused approaches to policy and service delivery. They have also pointed to clear areas for improvement and outlined what steps the Scottish Government and public sector stakeholders can take to ensure the ethos, aims and vision of GIRFEC is fully realised in 2046.