

# KEY LEARNING FOR CHANGE

ABERDEENSHIRE BAIRNS' HOOSE PROGRAMME THEORY  
NOVEMBER 2025

Dr Mary Mitchell, Dr Camille Warrington, Dr Carol Duncan



## Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to all those who have contributed to this report including:

- Professionals who gave their time to be interviewed and/or agreed to be involved in the focus groups.
- Members of the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder Partnership who have openly supported a learning culture to enhance the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose, and specifically to those who gave feedback on different sections of the report.
- The Scottish Government for funding the Scottish Pathfinder programme.
- The School of Social and Political Science Communications Team at the University of Edinburgh for the design work on the report.
- Other members of the research team who supported thinking about Bairns' Hoose Programme Theory including Dr Jennifer Lavoie, Professor John Devaney, Dr Christopher Wretman, Dr Christina McMellon and Eilidh Lamb.

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Glossary and Acronyms</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Methodology.....	9
Realist informed evaluation and programme theory .....	9
Structure of the report.....	12
<b>1. Implementing transformational systems change</b> .....	<b>14</b>
Current context.....	14
Intended outcomes.....	15
Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children.....	15
Progress to date.....	16
Moving forward and areas for development.....	17
<b>2. Multidisciplinary working</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Current context.....	21
Intended outcomes.....	21
Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children.....	22
Progress to date .....	22
Moving forward and areas for development.....	23
<b>3. Voice</b> .....	<b>27</b>
Current context.....	27
Intended outcomes.....	28
Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children.....	28
Progress to date .....	29
Moving forward and areas for development.....	30
<b>4. Space – ‘hub-and-spoke’ model</b> .....	<b>33</b>
Current context.....	33
Intended outcomes.....	34
Core assumptions – how our plans will for create change for children .....	34
Progress to date .....	35
Moving forward and areas for development.....	36
<b>5. Recovery</b> .....	<b>39</b>
Current context.....	39
Intended outcomes.....	39

Core recovery assumptions – how our plans will create change for children.....	40
Progress to date .....	41
Moving forward and areas for development.....	43
<b>6. Health.....</b>	<b>45</b>
Current context.....	45
Intended outcomes.....	46
Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children.....	46
Progress to date .....	47
Moving forward and areas for development.....	48
<b>7. Justice.....</b>	<b>50</b>
Current context.....	50
Intended outcomes.....	51
Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children.....	51
Progress to date .....	53
Moving forward and areas for development.....	54
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Appendix 1: Critical questions for reflection .....</b>	<b>60</b>
Implementing transformational systems change .....	60
Multidisciplinary working.....	61
Voice .....	62
Space .....	63
Recovery.....	64
Health.....	65
Justice.....	66
<b>Appendix 2: Bairns’ Hoose Standards.....</b>	<b>67</b>

## Executive Summary

Bairns' Hoose is a multidisciplinary approach currently being developed through a 'pathfinder' programme led by the Scottish Government. The model, based on the European Barnahus, aims to improve multidisciplinary responses to children affected by abuse.<sup>1</sup> It does this by bringing together child protection, justice, recovery and health responses into a seamless collective approach under one 'roof' or programme known as Bairns' Hoose. Across Scotland, Bairns' Hoose aims to be a catalyst for transformational change to improve children's experiences and outcomes after identification of abuse or maltreatment.

**Key learning for change: Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose programme theory** summarises findings of a formative evaluation of the first 20 months of Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder (February 2024 to September 2025). This pathfinder is led by Aberdeenshire Council and involves the Crown Office and Prosecution Service (COPFS), NHS Grampian, Police Scotland, Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA), the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service (SCTS) and the voluntary sector, represented by Children First. Findings are drawn from evaluation activities led by the University of Edinburgh, in partnership with University of Bedfordshire.

The aim of the evaluation was to learn about:

**How do planned changes resulting from Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder Partnership work to improve supports for child victims' safety, justice, recovery and recognition in the aftermath of abuse?**

Findings are drawn from a mixed methods study including:

- a survey of professionals
- interviews with 28 multidisciplinary professionals
- seven focus groups with 23 multidisciplinary professionals
- review of documentation
- development and refinement of an initial programme theory, and
- participation in a range of multi-agency partnership events.

This report is structured around an updated programme theory focused on seven core areas of Bairns' Hoose development: **implementing transformational systems change, multidisciplinary working, voice, space, recovery, justice and health.**

Each section presents findings about the current context; intended outcomes (changes for children Bairns' Hoose aims to achieve); core assumptions (theories about how and why stakeholders expect the programme to deliver those changes); progress to date; and potential areas for development. Each section has a series of associated critical reflective questions designed to support partners to respond to challenges and areas for development. These are listed in Appendix 1.

### Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose vision

The Aberdeenshire Pathfinder Partnership has a clear, shared view that their Bairns' Hoose approach is bigger than a building or buildings, and that what they are creating is a multi-agency, rights-based, trauma-informed approach to supporting all children (and their families) after identification of harm

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://barnahus.eu/barnahus/about-barnahus/>

and maltreatment. Given the large geographical area of Aberdeenshire, the strategic group acknowledged that a different way of thinking about delivering Bairns' Hoose was required. As such the Bairns' Hoose vision incorporates a 'hub-and-spoke' approach to delivery.

### Implementing transformational systems change

**Context and progress:** Learning from the evaluation highlights the value and presence of strong governance, leadership and phased planning to embed Bairns' Hoose sustainably. Successful aspects of implementation in Aberdeenshire include:

- early alignment of a collective vision across agencies at a strategic level, a robust change management approach which can be flexible and responsive to the local context, particularly noting the hub-and-spoke approach, and alignment to core principles and standards of the national Bairns' Hoose agenda.
- regular strategic meetings with broad agency representation, supported by thematic subgroups to deliver co-owned 'tests of change', which have supported interagency problem solving, timely implementation of changes and accountability.
- high levels of commitment and motivation to deliver transformational systems change.
- a range of achievements including (among others) the timely operationalisation of a new recovery service; opening and use of the Kemnay Bairns' Hoose hub, and identification and refurbishment of six 'spoke' sites.

The Aberdeenshire Pathfinder has a 'soft boundary' with neighbouring Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder, with both Partnerships committed to collaborate on key areas of need. This responds to the presence of local partners (e.g. health, police, COPFS, Children First) spanning both areas and a reality that many children's lives are marked by connections and movement across the two authorities. This commitment to cross-border working appears to maximise opportunities for efficiency and learning.

**Focus of development:** Resourcing to sustain and develop Bairns' Hoose services across the geographical expanse of Aberdeenshire remains the most significant area of concern for partnership leadership. Other areas identified as priorities for development include systems for data capture and analysis through which to measure and evidence impact; embedding feedback from children and families in a meaningful way; enabling remote 'live link' to courts within Bairns' Hoose buildings; and ensuring clear links between coordinated local change and national initiatives.

### Multidisciplinary working

**Context and progress:** Multidisciplinary working is at the heart of the Bairns' Hoose approach. Across Aberdeenshire there appears to be many well-established multiagency practices and processes and evidence of strong working relationships across sectors, some long-standing in nature. Partners themselves recognise this as a key strength, and an essential component to supporting systems change and implementation of Bairns' Hoose working. An ambition of Aberdeenshire is to establish effective multidisciplinary working within the Bairns' Hoose approach without co-location of services. Focus to date has been on:

- identifying and employing the core multidisciplinary roles within the Bairns' Hoose,
- enhancing joint information-sharing, communication and decision-making processes, and
- reviewing the IRD processes and templates.

**Focus for development:** Further efforts will be required to replicate the success of strategic multidisciplinary working at operational or frontline levels. Investing and formalising regular opportunities to bring professionals from different sectors together with a shared sense of purpose is likely to support trusting cross-disciplinary relations, effective information-sharing, and understanding of each other's roles at an operational level. Clear communication about the roles and remit of multidisciplinary Bairns' Hoose personnel will be important for wider stakeholders. There is particular recognition of the need to monitor, further define and refine the new Bairns' Hoose Coordinator role which is understood to be a critical component of multidisciplinary processes and case management. While progress has been made towards tackling gaps in knowledge and understanding across the wider workforce – such as through collaborative justice webinars - further joint training and learning may be required across a broader range of Bairns' Hoose components to build understanding and confidence within the wider workforce.

## Voice

**Context and progress:** The principle of *voice* - ensuring children are heard and involved in decision-making in Bairns' Hoose - is both a central value and a challenge within Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose. Bairns' Hoose is recognised locally as a catalyst for deepening children's participation rights across services and is also acknowledged to build on a wider culture shift promoting children's participation (nationally and locally). A number of practical steps supporting children's participation have been implemented in Aberdeenshire. These include:

- development of a 'voice' subgroup to progress this area of work
- development of systems for gathering feedback on children's joint interviews and medical examinations and recovery support
- introduction of Advocacy Rights and Recovery (ARR) workers – known as recovery workers - to support representation of children's and families' views in a range of professional decision-making processes
- children's input into Bairns' Hoose building design and recovery worker recruitment, and
- establishment of a local Changemakers group (children and young people with expertise based on relevant lived experience).

**Focus for development:** Identified areas for development include further embedding meaningful choice for children and families within their Bairns' Hoose journey. This is likely to require additional efforts to ensure children and families understand key processes (including through provision of accessible information), alongside mechanisms to represent children's views in decision-making fora. There is also a recognised need for more systematic and coordinated collection of children's feedback and experiences across all Bairns' Hoose partners, ensuing feedback genuinely informs service review and development. Additional priorities for development include: developing feedback loops to ensure children understand the impact of their views and feedback on professional decision-making; strengthening opportunities for children's collective participation to inform Bairns' Hoose development; and renewing efforts to engage and improve representation of diverse children's views including younger children, disabled children and other underserved communities.

## Space

**Context and progress:** The notion of space, both physical and emotional, is understood to play a key role in supporting children's recovery and engagement in justice, health and protection processes within the Bairns' Hoose. Through a hub-and-spoke model it is hoped to promote children's sense of

physical and emotional safety – minimising anxiety and fostering reflection, decompression, and trust-building. Progress is reflected in:

- the delivery and opening of the Bairns' Hoose hub building in Kemnay
- Kemnay Bairns' Hoose now being operational for joint investigative interviews, multi-agency meetings and recovery work
- the identification and refurbishment of Bairns' Hoose spoke settings
- building designs which draw on learning from children directly and through other established Bairns' Hoose sites,
- the prioritisation of trauma-informed and child-centred design elements in hub-and-spoke spaces to maximise the comfort and sense of safety of children, families and professionals who use and attend them.

**Focus for development:** Key challenges in relation to the Bairns' Hoose spaces in Aberdeenshire include the long-term sustainability and resourcing of Bairns' Hoose facilities - particularly the Kemnay hub – and determining which partners will contribute to the ongoing funding and management of the building. Further challenges include: ensuring an equitable Bairns' Hoose offer to all children across the locality; data collection to understand how the spaces are being used and experienced; understanding building management requirements; and finalising outstanding elements of the buildings to operationalise recovery spaces, medical examinations and remote court links.

## Recovery

**Context and progress:** Addressing the gap in recovery support is recognised as a priority area for Bairns' Hoose development in Aberdeenshire. Progress to date has included:

- funding for and recruitment of three Children First Advocacy Rights and Recovery (ARR) roles and one Children First Bairns' Hoose Coordinator
- opening of the Bairns' Hoose 'hub' in Kemnay with a base for the Bairns' Hoose coordinator and space for recovery work
- new processes enabling the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator and recovery workers (ARRs) to support children's attendance at investigative interviews (JIIs) and/or offering children and/or families longer term support from the point of a JII
- Recovery workers holding and supporting caseloads of children
- Active engagement with Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHS) to support the recovery offer.

**Focus for development:** A central overarching challenge nationally and locally remains the degree of ambiguity about the meaning and role of different types of *recovery support* for children after abuse. Addressing this ambiguity will help inform decision-making about future allocations and refine the Bairns' Hoose recovery offer. Related challenges include building an improved picture of available local resources and current need (this includes work to understand the capacity of local recovery workers and data about children currently engaged with CAMHS who fall under the Bairns' Hoose remit). Another priority is refining or developing coordinated processes to assess children's recovery needs. Clarity about assessment for recovery needs will be required to support case management – including decisions about triaging, case closure and parity of decision-making about children's allocations to support (e.g. who gets allocated a recovery worker and who doesn't) and this should also support data gathering to inform future resource allocation.

## Health

**Context and progress:** Children's health needs after violence and abuse will vary, spanning multiple different services, and interplay with their wider safety, recovery and justice needs. Key health components of the Bairns' Hoose model being considered in Aberdeenshire include medical examinations (comprehensive and forensic), speech and language support, school nursing, and child and adolescent mental health support. Key achievements to date include:

- Securing Pathfinder funding for four new Bairns' Hoose specific health posts (health coordinator, paediatrician, speech and language therapist and assistant)
- beginning to review, design and equip the health room within the Bairns' Hoose hub-and-spoke facilities – supported by related 'tests of change'.

Together these will offer the potential to undertake medical examinations, assessments (including by speech and language therapists) and some health interventions within the Bairns' Hoose buildings. In particular, the Bairns' Hoose health coordinator role provides the potential to liaise with wider health services to ensure children's identified health needs are followed up and met.

**Focus for development:** Moving forward, the sustainability of the health coordinator post and other posts associated with short-term tests of change will be a concern for all partners. As a new role, the Bairns' Hoose health coordinator role will require review and refinement in line with emerging evidence of need. In addition, wider health involvement and commitment to Bairns' Hoose is likely to be challenging in the context of current strains on the NHS Grampian workforce and ensuring equity of the health offer for children in Aberdeenshire. Another key priority is resolving difficulties or inconsistencies in sharing health-related case information between different health services and wider Bairns' Hoose partners, to support timely and effective decision-making and assessment.

## Justice

**Context and progress:** The central aims of Bairns' Hoose are to reduce re-traumatisation or systems harm and improving access to fair, timely, and child-friendly justice. Meeting these aims and delivering genuinely child-friendly justice is understood to require significant shifts in procedure and culture, particularly around evidence-gathering, information-sharing, streamlined legal processes, and the multidisciplinary interface between safeguarding and prosecution. Justice processes in Bairns' Hoose will involve police, social work and in some cases the prosecution service (COPFS), the court estate (SCTS) and the Children's Hearings System (SCRA and CHS). Progress on justice to date includes:

- the introduction of the Scottish Child Interview Model providing a strong basis on which Bairns' Hoose has developed in Aberdeenshire
- the Bairns' Hoose hub and spokes now being used as preferred locations for investigative interviews
- establishment of an active justice subgroup spanning Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City with representation from police, COPFS, SCTS and SCRA
- establishment of quarterly quality assurance meetings between police, prosecution service and Children's Hearings System to review the evidential quality of joint investigative interviews and ensure best practice is occurring
- collaboration between the Victim Information and Advice service (VIA), which sits within the prosecution service, and Children First's Advocacy Rights and Recovery service, and
- learning events and webinars to enhance wider workforce understanding and accessibility to justice systems and professionals.

**Focus for development:** Moving forward, priority areas of focus are coordination of communication and continuity of support and advocacy for children and families engaged with justice processes (including children’s hearings). On a practical level, finalising the equipping and operation of remote court suites and beginning to test their use are also key – this will include exploring if and how Bairns’ Hoose might increase opportunities for children to give pre-recorded witness evidence (Evidence by Commissioner). Across all of these tasks, capturing children’s feedback should support a deeper understanding of what justice means for children and support refinement of different justice processes to minimise harm. It is recognised that efforts and problem-solving are required both locally and nationally to identify further strategies to reduce children’s contact and time engaged with trial processes.

*Key learning for change:* Aberdeenshire Bairns’ Hoose programme theory offers a collective vision and summary of significant progress in relation to implementation of the Bairns’ Hoose model in Aberdeenshire. The learning gathered offers valuable insights into what is needed to translate this vision into practice and reinforces the importance of continued collaboration, reflection and adaption as the approach evolves. The complexity and scale of the transformational systems change being implemented at this level takes time, and we would like to stress that the content of this report should not be read simply as a ‘to do’ list for the Pathfinder. Instead, we would suggest the report be used as a reflective tool to collectively help guide the Partnership’s decision-making over the coming year.

## Glossary and Acronyms

Bairns' Hoose	Scottish adaptation of the European Barnahus model, a child-centred, trauma-informed approach to supporting child victims and witnesses of crime.
Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder	A Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder is a local Scottish partnership selected and funded by the Scottish Government to test and develop the Bairns' Hoose model.
Barnahus	A European service model where multidisciplinary and interagency professionals cooperate in a child-friendly building to respond to children's needs for justice, safety and recovery after abuse or maltreatment. The term means 'children's house' in Icelandic.
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
Children	Any persons under 18 years.  Please note that we recognise that the term 'children and young people' is preferred by many adolescent children and professionals who work with them. However, for the purposes of clarity, we use the term children in line with its definition within the UNCRC (1989) – to highlight the remit of Bairns' Hoose to work with those up to the age of 18 years.
Child abuse and maltreatment	All forms of child abuse and maltreatment including (but not limited to) child sexual abuse, physical abuse, domestic abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and witnessing abuse towards others.
Children's Hearings	The Children's Hearings System is a non-court-based tribunal system in which decisions about the safety and welfare of children are made by three lay decision-makers, with a sheriff retaining a role in the case of appeals or disagreements about the facts presented before a panel.
COPFS	Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service
Families	The term 'families' is used here inclusively to denote any non-abusing parents or caregivers and at times encompasses wider close family members such as siblings.
IRD	Interagency referral discussion
JII	Joint investigative interview
SCIM	Scottish Child Interview Model
SCRA	Scottish Children's Reporter Association
SCTS	Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

## Introduction

The Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose represents a transformative step in the way we respond to children who have experienced harm or maltreatment. Inspired by the international Barnahus model<sup>2</sup> and rooted in the Scottish Government's commitment to upholding children's rights and improving children's outcomes, the Bairns' Hoose model seeks to create a safe, child-centred environment, reduce secondary traumatisation, ensure access to holistic support at the earliest possible stage, and ensure a coordinated multi-agency approach for children after identification of abuse or maltreatment. The concept of the 'four rooms' within a Barnahus – health, justice, recovery and protection – symbolises the four essential services being provided in one location. Although each service may respond separately, they aim to work together seamlessly, addressing the unique needs of each child.

The University of Edinburgh, working with the University of Bedfordshire, partnered with the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder Partnership in 2024<sup>3</sup> to carry out an independent formative evaluation of the early development of their Bairns' Hoose model. This partnership is led by Aberdeenshire Council and involves the Crown Office and Prosecution Service (COPFS), NHS Grampian, Police Scotland, Scottish Children's Reporters Administration (SCRA), the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service (SCTS) and the voluntary sector, represented by Children First.

Aberdeenshire Council is a predominantly rural local authority. It sits in the north-east of Scotland and is the sixth largest in the country in terms of population (Scottish Government, 2025), and fourth-largest in terms of geographical area (Scottish Government, 2011). In communities such as Aberdeenshire, the challenge — and opportunity — lies in adapting the Bairns' Hoose model to local needs, geography, and service landscapes, while staying true to its core principles.

While the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder Partnership is organising its Bairns' Hoose separately to Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose Partnership, several services operate across both local authority areas including one police division, one health board (NHS Grampian), one sheriffdom (Grampian, Highlands and Islands) and one SCRA locality office overseeing children's hearings across both local authority areas. As a result of the considerable overlap of service areas, the two Pathfinders have a commitment to cooperation and operation of 'soft boundaries'.

This report, *Key Learning for Change: Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Programme Theory*, builds on learning from the initial programme theory developed by the Aberdeenshire research team for internal use by the local authority's Bairns' Hoose strategic group (the 'Oversight' group) and a local area professionals survey on current systems and readiness for change (Duncan et al., 2025). Both of these provided insight into the early stages of planning and development of the hub-and-spoke Bairns' Hoose approach being developed in Aberdeenshire.

The aim of this report is to record, and build further understanding of the progress, assumptions and logic of the developing approach in Aberdeenshire: the hopes about how different services and activities will come together to improve outcomes for children in Aberdeenshire who have experienced abuse and maltreatment. We hope this report provides a practical tool for reflection, planning and future evaluation – supporting partners' work toward a shared vision for change: a

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://barnahus.eu/barnahus/about-barnahus/>

<sup>3</sup> In 2022 the Scottish Government announced its plan to roll out Bairns' Hoose across Scotland by 2027 and agreed to several local authorities being involved in Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder projects to develop a blueprint for implementation.

child-centred, trauma-informed, and rights-based response that puts the safety, wellbeing, and recovery of children first.

## Methodology

The aim of the formative evaluation was to learn:

### **How do planned changes resulting from the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder Partnership work to improve support for child victims' safety, justice, recovery and recognition in the aftermath of abuse?**

The research team adopted an embedded role as active members of the partnership. This helped to enable a formative model of evaluation involving ongoing evidence-gathering about Pathfinder development being fed back to support partnership decision-making.

Learning and evidence-gathering activities between February 2024 and November 2025 included:

- attending monthly strategic group meetings and sub-group meetings.
- developing and testing an initial Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Programme Theory with stakeholders (November 2024) – see below for further details.
- providing internal reflection on work (progress report November 2024).
- undertaking a baseline professional survey on current systems and readiness for change, published in May 2025 (Duncan et al., 2025).
- conducting and analysing semi-structured interviews with 28 multidisciplinary professionals from across both partnerships involved the development of Bairns' Hoose between November 2024 and March 2025.
- conducting and analysing seven thematic focus groups involving 23 multidisciplinary professionals.
- review of documentation (including STaRT,<sup>4</sup> strategic and sub-group minutes).
- knowledge exchange and learning activities initiated by the research team, including presentations of interim findings and an interim programme theory to the strategic group in November 2024 and May 2025, an international knowledge-sharing event on justice and recovery across different Barnahus, *Conversations for Change* seminar (July 2025), and *Making Sense of Bairns' Hoose* event (November 2025),
- providing an updated programme theory: *Key Learning for Change: Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Programme Theory* (November 2025)

All research activities have level 3 approval from the School of Social and Political Science ethics committee at the University of Edinburgh. Ethical approval has also been granted for employee involvement in the study across multidisciplinary partners.

## Realist informed evaluation and programme theory

Realist approaches are particularly suited to evaluating complex interventions with wider learning potential. Realist approaches recognise that programmes like Bairns' Hoose do not have fixed

---

<sup>4</sup> Standards Self-Assessment and Readiness Tool (StART) used by the Scottish Government to gather evidence of Pathfinder progress in the Bairns' Hoose implementation.

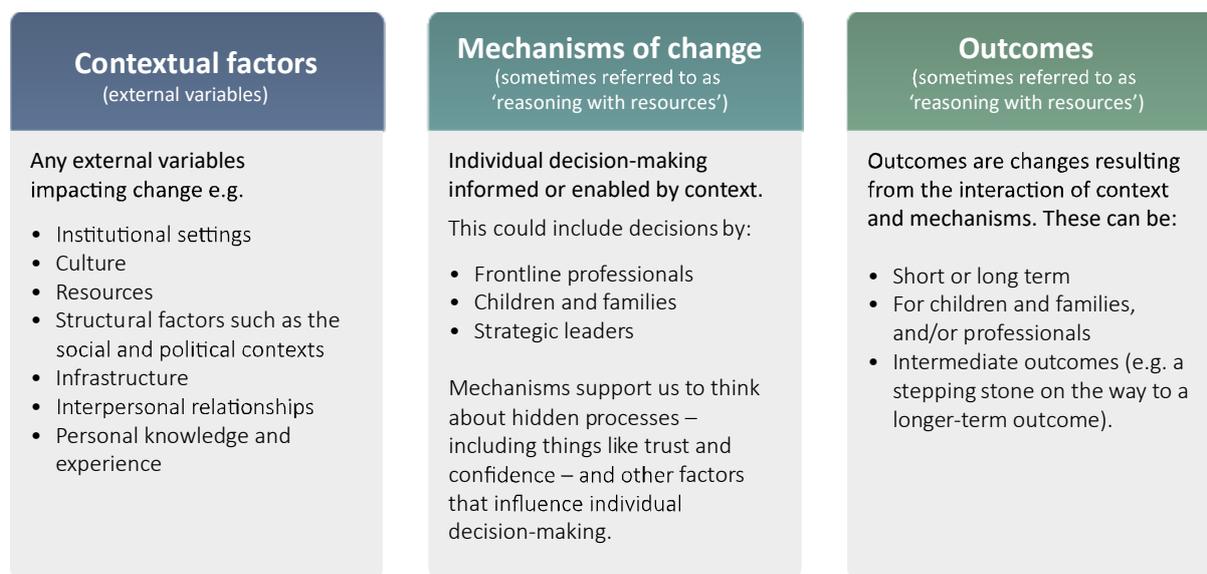
boundaries but are open and dynamic and interact with wider social systems. They are also particularly useful for evaluating programmes that produce mixed outcomes – helping us better understand how and why differential outcomes occur.

### Developing and updating a programme theory for Aberdeenshire Bairns’ Hoose

Our realist (informed) evaluation starts with programme theory (a type of *Theory of Change*). This is an evaluation tool that helps surface assumptions about why stakeholders in Aberdeenshire think their Bairns’ Hoose programme will improve outcomes for children affected by abuse and maltreatment. Stakeholders then collect data to test if these assumptions are valid, supporting the consolidation, refinement or change of plans accordingly. Programme theory also helps build understanding about why the Bairns’ Hoose approach works differently in different contexts or with different individuals.

In the Aberdeenshire Bairns’ Hoose Pathfinder we use this approach to express theories (or *assumptions*) about how the Bairns’ Hoose approach works in relation to *contexts* (external variables such as resources, culture, policy frameworks), *mechanisms* (‘reasoning with resources’) and *outcomes* (for children and families) (see Figure 1). We have developed separate assumptions for different Bairns’ Hoose components and processes of interest to partners: implementing transformational systems change, multidisciplinary working, space, justice, health, recovery, and voice.

## Programme Theory structure



**Figure 1: Explaining key components of programme theory**

An initial Bairns’ Hoose programme theory was developed in November 2024 and shared with partners. This was based on: a review of existing Barnahus and Bairns’ Hoose theories of change (Herbert and Bromfield, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2024); Scottish Government literature including the National Bairns’ Hoose Standards (Healthcare Improvement Scotland, 2023); Aberdeenshire Bairns’ Hoose Pathfinder documentation; and a programme theory workshop with key stakeholders that took place in September 2024. This document represents an updated and more detailed version of the emerging programme theory following data collection since January 2025.

It is important to note that the Bairns' Hoose programme theory (and this report) is primarily intended to be used as a tool by partners – helping them review and reflect on their plans and activities alongside the outcomes they hope to achieve and the wider Bairns' Hoose National Standards.

### Outcome framework for Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose

A key starting point for developing a programme theory is being clear about the **outcomes** desired from the programme. In the initial programme theory for Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder Partnership, we proposed an outcome framework that linked to local priorities and aligned with the Scottish Government National Bairns' Hoose agenda for change and Scottish National Standards (Healthcare Improvement Scotland 2023). It was developed on the basis of European Barnahus literature (Barnahus Network, 2021; Johansson et al., 2017 and 2024); learning from North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose evaluation (Mitchell et al., 2024); and outcomes implicit within the Scottish Bairns' Hoose Standards (Healthcare Improvement Scotland, 2023) and Aberdeenshire Pathfinder internal documentation.

In broad terms, we proposed that the Scottish Bairns' Hoose model can be considered as seeking to address change for children affected by abuse and maltreatment in five interdependent areas: **Recovery; Safety; Justice; Rights; and Reduction of Systems Harm** (see Figure 2). These outcomes were developed in response to local programme theory workshops and sense-checked with local stakeholders.



**Figure 2: Five key outcome areas for Scottish Bairns' Hoose Pathfinders**

To bring about desired outcomes, people need to do things differently. As part of the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder project activities are being undertaken to test and implement new processes, services and professional roles, and refine existing systems or procedures.

### Unique Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose vision

A collective vision is vital to help provide a sense of direction and purpose to the programme for change. The Aberdeenshire partnership has a clear, shared view that their Bairns' Hoose approach is

bigger than a building or buildings, and that what they are creating is a multi-agency, rights-based, trauma-informed approach to supporting all children (and their families) after identification of harm and maltreatment.

*I think for us in Aberdeenshire... there is an agreed vision of... Bairns' Hoose being more than a house... I think we are on the same page when we come to thinking about the whole process as the Bairns' Hoose. And a complete change to really what we're doing, but [also] a change in terms of really thinking about our interaction with families, really thinking about, you know, a trauma approach. (Professional 10)*

*I think it's not at all about a house or a space, this is about how we all as a collective, all of those who touch children's lives throughout that justice and protection system, transform the way that we work and the way that we challenge and the way that we support and uphold children's rights throughout that process. (Professional 15)*

Given the large geographical area of Aberdeenshire, the strategic group acknowledged that a different way of thinking about delivering Bairns' Hoose was required. As such, the Bairns' Hoose vision incorporates a 'hub-and-spoke' approach to delivery.

*A house with the four rooms, but within Aberdeenshire that model can't really work, given the geographical spread of Aberdeenshire. And arguably it's not particularly trauma-informed to transport children, you know, an hour, an hour and a half to a location out with their local communities. But the spirit of the Bairns' Hoose, as I understand it, is about that really tight multi-agency or multidisciplinary support from the moment of disclosure, right through to recovery. (Professional 5)*

## **Structure of the report**

*Key Learning for Change: Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Programme Theory* is structured to provide an overview of key areas identified by partners as priorities for implementing the Bairns' Hoose in Aberdeenshire:

1. Implementing transformational systems change
2. Multidisciplinary working
3. Voice
4. Space – 'hub-and-spoke' model
5. Recovery
6. Health
7. Justice

Each section includes: a brief overview of the current context; intended outcomes; partners' core assumptions about how partners the programme will work; progress to date; and areas for development.

Articulating assumptions is useful for a number of reasons:

1. It helps express the programme theory (or theory of change) about why people think their programme or actions will lead to an improved way of operating.

2. It supports partners to test or refine the programme theory by asking things like: 'are our assumptions sound?', 'do they make sense', 'is everything in place to allow them to happen', 'will these assumptions be the same in all circumstances'?
3. They guide the data or indicators that will be helpful to evidence if a programme is 'working' in the way it is expected or intended to.

*Appendix 1* contains additional critical questions for implementation across each key area.

# 1. Implementing transformational systems change

(Scottish Bairns' Hoose Standards 1, 2 and 11)

## Current context

The local authority-led partnership for Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose secured Pathfinder funding commencing October 2023. This funding is widely recognised to have acted as a catalyst for ambitious systems change locally, aiming to improve multi-agency responses to children after identification of abuse or maltreatment.

*Bairns' Hoose is absolutely the excuse, or the reason that we needed to do things better... the reason for us to actually go and do what a lot of us, individually in our own silos, might have gone, well actually, I wish we had the time to do this. And it's actually just made us focus, and come together. (Professional 25)*

The Aberdeenshire model builds on the recent national implementation (and local pilot) of the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM), a joint police and social work initiative (Holland et al, 2025). This was recognised as a significant step to embedding trauma-informed and child-centred practice in investigative interviewing, a process central to the Bairns' Hoose vision, and the success of the multidisciplinary (social work and justice) partnership work it provided was noted to support local agency buy-in to the Pathfinder programme.

*The SCIM team's experience did play a big part in what, I guess, the confidence for Aberdeenshire to put in the Pathfinder [bid], well we've got this key part already embedded that is working well. (Professional 25)*

There has been a strong culture within the partnership of driving change forward, but at the same time recognition that they need to give themselves permission and patience to 'try things out'. This sits in a context of inevitable pressures, particularly within the current funding climate, to evidence immediate improvement.

The Pathfinder programme in Aberdeenshire aligns with and builds on wider policy initiatives which provide supportive contexts for Bairns' Hoose implementation. Notably this includes recent incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scots law, mandating change towards child-centred and rights-focused practice across all agencies.<sup>5</sup>

Wider national policy initiatives also create a conducive context for promoting child-centred and trauma-informed practice. Examples include the NHS Education for Scotland National Trauma Transformation Programme,<sup>6</sup> the Independent Care Review and 'the Promise' (including the redesign of the Children's Hearings System),<sup>7</sup> and a wider roll-out by the prosecution service in Scotland of use of pre-recorded witness evidence (Evidence by Commissioner) hearings to avoid children testifying in live criminal justice hearings.

---

<sup>5</sup> UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024

<sup>6</sup> National Trauma Transformation Programme, <https://www.traumatransformation.scot>.

<sup>7</sup> The Promise Scotland, <https://thepromise.scot>.

## Intended outcomes

Work on implementing transformational systems change through the introduction of the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose approach aims to achieve the following changes for children:

- Children's rights to justice, safety and recovery are upheld through a child-centred, trauma-informed approach.
- Children benefit from seamless collaboration between health, justice, and child protection services.
- Children experience consistent, coordinated support from a confident, well-equipped workforce operating in trauma-informed spaces.
- Children are at the heart of a system built on strong interagency partnerships and best-interest decision-making.

## Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children

This section outlines five key assumptions about how people believe aspects of the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose pathfinder will bring about change for children.

### Assumption 1 – a shared vision

If partners collectively develop and maintain a shared vision for the hub-and-spoke Bairns' Hoose, with improved outcomes for children at its heart, stakeholders will remain motivated and child-centred, and siloed thinking will be challenged.

*My experience is always that people come with their own agendas within multi-agency practice and, you know, whilst you might all have an end goal that you're working towards, people usually are fighting their own corner, whereas I think what I can see is real evidence that people are holding young people to the heart of this and about the difference it can make for them.  
(Professional 15)*

### Assumption 2 – leadership and governance

If effective leadership and governance structures are in place, focused on building interagency relationships and trust, this will support the development of a genuinely shared strategic vision and collaborative multi-agency working practices. At a practical level, relationships developed within the strategic group become the foundation for 'off-table' collaboration and problem solving, enabling professionals from different agencies to approach one another and work together in ways they hadn't previously felt authorised to do.

### Assumption 3 – strategic multi-agency relationships supporting frontline vision and understanding

When interagency relationships are invested in at a strategic level and there are high levels of commitment from senior partners, there will be a strong foundation for frontline multi-agency implementation of the Bairns' Hoose approach.

*I think, getting each other out to each other's agencies. So, I went out to COPFS and SCRA, and said, this is the SCIM model, this is the impact, and just actually getting into the nitty-gritty of that. And [the Assistant Procurator Fiscal], and [National Bairns' Hoose lead, SCTS] speaking to*

*strategic groups about, this is the process, this is the evidence by commissioner. I think those are the types of things that really have worked well. (Professional 25)*

#### Assumption 4 – hub-and-spoke approach to implementing transformational systems change

When Bairns' Hoose is delivered via a series of six 'spoke' spaces as well as the central hub, this strengthens relationships with locality social work teams based in those spaces. This multi-purpose use of the space supports multidisciplinary working, understanding of the Bairns' Hoose model and embedding the model in the wider service landscape.

#### Assumption 5 – soft boundaries

When 'soft' boundaries are recognised and tested between the two Bairns' Hoose pathfinders – Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City – as they implement their separate Bairns' Hoose approaches, then learning about best practice will be shared and professionals will be better able to meet children's needs.

### Progress to date

There is evidence of a range of activities aimed at supporting effective implementation in the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder between February 2024 and September 2025. These include:

- **Establishment of an active multidisciplinary strategic group with broad representation**, widely recognised as having provided an effective structure for leadership, planning, authorisation of change and accountability.
- **Strong value-based leadership of the Pathfinder partnership** encompassing a willingness to challenge existing services and practice, and be ambitious for what could be achieved.
- **Strong partnership with voluntary sector partner** (Children First), supported and represented by arrangements for joint chairing of the strategic group (Head of Children's Services with Children First Assistant Director).
- **Leadership and broader accountability for the work** are increased through established reporting lines to the Child Protection Committee and cross-sectoral Chief Officers Group (COG) with whom the chair of the strategic group shares progress and a regularly updated risk register.
- **A commitment to sharing learning and maintaining 'soft boundaries' with neighbouring (Aberdeen City) Pathfinder**, adding value to both sites' progress. Having the University of Edinburgh as a learning partner in both sites has also added value to shared critical thinking and learning about Bairns' Hoose implementation.
- **Early multidisciplinary systems mapping** <sup>8</sup> which built a shared understanding of the current system for children, as well as helping collectively identify gaps in support for children and priority areas for change.

*Yeah, I think the best thing that we did was the process mapping and the swim lane exercise, because it got under the skin of what we were trying to do. (Professional 15)*

---

<sup>8</sup> This exercise was referred to locally as the 'swim lanes' exercise.

- **Building on strong established relationships across Aberdeenshire** to support healthy debate and accountability.

*That's the thing with Aberdeenshire, anything that the Bairns' Hoose throws up in terms of difficulties, there will always be a solution because of those developed relationships. And, in my experience, it's those relationships that will help something like the Bairns' Hoose actually work. (Professional 12)*

- **Focused working groups ('subgroups') coordinated by and reporting to the strategic group.** These support delivery of a series of 'tests of change' and are noted to support members feeling authorised to work 'off table' to problem solve and trial change.

*I find those [subgroup] spaces quite helpful in that they're more conversational, we're able to get into the depth a wee bit more around specific themes or areas or opportunities. (Professional 9)*

- **Early and effective implementation of several observable and significant systems changes.** Examples include the initiation of a new recovery service, opening and use of the Kemnay Bairns' Hoose hub, and identification and refurbishment of 'spoke' sites.
- **Programme of knowledge exchange activities** to support a learning culture and build trust.

*One of the really positive things I think has been the regular event and educational events... because it's driving two things. It's the knowledge that people have about how we're going to do what we're going to do and the different ideas behind it, and the sharing of knowledge... And then also just building the community of people who are involved in Bairns' Hoose. (Professional 8)*

## Moving forward and areas for development

The following section highlights a number of challenges or areas for development in relation to the assumptions about implementing transformational systems change through the Bairns' Hoose approach.

### Challenge 1: Operating without clarity about available future funding

Uncertainty about Scottish Government funding commitments, including 'last minute' funding decisions, impedes effective planning by creating pressure to spend money quickly, and undermines clarity about what money will be available.

*Something that I feel is projected very much to me, is the rush around funding. And people making decisions that aren't maybe necessarily well thought because of the rush of spending the funding. (Professional 27)*

Meanwhile the longer-term sustainability of funding is also unclear to partners. While the Scottish Government has indicated its intention to fund Pathfinders until 2027 there is concern about resources to sustain Bairns' Hoose and meet additional costs (building maintenance, staffing, recovery support, etc) in the longer term – particularly in light of a challenging public sector finance environment.

*Some decisions are being made that you kind of think ‘how thought through is that in the current landscape?’ Where we know that maybe in a year and a half’s time, we are going to be scrabbling around trying to pull money from here, there and everywhere just to keep the doors open. (Professional 9)*

This challenge is compounded by the lack of certainty about annual costs associated with a new model and complexity about the potential for future allocations from local and national agency budgets.

*After this year of funding, we’ve potentially got another year of funding [2026–2027] ... But after that, you know – does Aberdeenshire Council, police, health... is everyone going to agree to continue to pay for [recovery support] at the price that they will [need to] be [paid]? (Professional 10)*

### Challenge 2: Creating equitable service responses

Substantial investment in a new Bairns’ Hoose system at a time of significant funding pressures within the wider service landscape has been seen by many within the Pathfinder group to have created a level of inequity and tension across the different agencies involved in wider public protection.

*I think it throws up loads of tension... People have said to me ‘whole family support is like Aldi and Bairns’ Hoose is like John Lewis, it gets all the fancy stuff and everybody is excited about it and we are over here, scrimping and saving and getting the crap furniture from here, there and everywhere’. (Professional 9)*

### Challenge 3: Connecting strategic and frontline learning and change

A key challenge identified across both partnerships is how the wider workforce will come to know, understand and engage with the Bairns’ Hoose model and principles. A professional survey undertaken across Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire at the end of 2024 highlighted that two-thirds of the wider workforce knew only a little or nothing at all about Bairns’ Hoose (Duncan et al., 2025). Similarly, translating the ideas and commitment of the leadership to frontline operational changes is recognised to require a significant step change in planning.

*Building a sort of shared vision of how we think it could be... I think is something that’s been really effective... But then the other side [is the] delivery of that, which I think is a different thing... Shifting from the building of knowledge and building the vision to reality and delivery is a difficult shift. That maybe comes from... the make-up of the group changing or a clear delineation that says — this is delivery and requires strict deadlines, requires more commitment of time... Because I think it is less commitment of time to do the vision building, because people can buy into... the idea of it quite quickly. But it’s a different thing I think [to move to delivery], it’s a step change. (Professional 8)*

Further feedback from a learning event in November 2025 also questioned whether a more fundamental shift is required to ensure that transformational change is not just driven from the ‘top down’ but that more opportunities are created to ensure children, families and frontline practitioners are connecting, learning and influencing the changes needed.

#### Challenge 4: Integrated data collection

A recognised challenge for Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose is evidencing impact – ensuring that future funding commitments can be justified and there is understanding of children's needs and service development requirements. However, the aims of Bairns' Hoose work (e.g. improving long-term outcomes for children and minimising re-traumatisation) are notably difficult to evidence. This is further compounded by the multi-agency nature of Bairns' Hoose, which brings together agencies with different data systems and practices for measuring outcomes. While progress has been made, consistent and integrated data collection by different agencies remains a challenge. There are key gaps in current data available from certain Bairns' Hoose partners – such as how many children are a witness in court proceedings relating to child abuse or maltreatment. New data collection processes will require specialist resources for analysis and liaison with all partners to consider data usage at both local and national levels.

#### Challenge 5: Managing the pace of change

The Bairns' Hoose programme requires partners to implement constantly evolving plans and respond to new challenges while fulfilling their main roles. While it is widely recognised that the speed of change and early implementation have been 'remarkable' (Professional 15), the sustainability of this momentum has also been questioned.

#### Challenge 6: Engaging those authorised to make changes

The scale and challenge of Bairns' Hoose implementation require different systems and organisations to make significant changes to the current way things are done. Bairns' Hoose partners include complex systems and organisations, such as health services, and this means that while some changes can be trialled or authorised locally, others may require national-level authorisation or authorisations by senior individuals not present in the strategic group. Individuals' confidence to initiate change, make decisions and challenge others is also relevant here.

*It's getting the right people in and also... we all have to be confident and be able to stick our foot in the door and say, 'well no, we don't agree with that'. 'Cause we're challenging, we're challenging what's been in place for many, many years, and a lot of people don't like change, and struggle with it. (Professional 2)*

#### Challenge 7: Linking national and local systems change

A related challenge is the need to link and coordinate local change with national initiatives. This requires efforts in two directions: firstly, for local partners to remain informed about relevant national policy initiatives across their agencies, and secondly for local Bairns' Hoose partnerships to have routes to feed local learning into national conversations. There is recognition that some agencies appear to be further on at a national level than others with regard to supporting Bairns' Hoose implementation, and this can have implications for local partners' authorisation to implement change.

#### Challenge 8: Inconsistencies across adjacent Bairns' Hoose Pathfinders, when operating 'soft boundaries'

Several professionals identified the need for both the Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Partnerships to discuss the implications of their commitment to operating soft Bairns' Hoose boundaries,

particularly in relation to consistency of approach and how the Bairns' Hoose' projects are moving forward both independently and together.

*You know, 'Shire are great at some things and City are great at some things... I think it could be better because we know that we're talking about possible soft boundaries, if we can be a wee bit more, you know, kind of, together... I think there are certain areas in the Bairns' Hoose I feel that, you know, should be the same across the City and Shire, albeit we're different local authorities, but we could do things together and hopefully move things forward. (Professional 6)*

## 2. Multidisciplinary working

(Scottish Bairns' Hoose Standards 1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11)

### Current context

Effective multidisciplinary working has long been recognised as essential to addressing reports or disclosures of abuse and providing more effective responses to supporting children (Herbert & Bromfield, 2019). It relies on collaboration between professionals from different services and sectors sharing aims, information, tasks and responsibilities. Multidisciplinary working is a foundation of the European Barnahus model and the Scottish Bairns' Hoose Standards (Healthcare Improvement Scotland, 2023). Expectations regarding multidisciplinary working in Scotland are supported and underpinned by policy and legislation such as *Getting it Right for Every Child* (GIRFEC)<sup>9</sup> policy and practice framework, *National Guidance on Child Protection in Scotland 2021- Updated 2023*<sup>10</sup>, and the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*<sup>11</sup>.

There are well-established multi-agency practices and processes across Aberdeenshire and evidence of strong working relationships across sectors, some long-standing in nature. Partners themselves recognise this as a key strength and an essential component to supporting systems change and the implementation of Bairns' Hoose. They also acknowledge ongoing wider challenges relating to multidisciplinary working. A recent survey of multidisciplinary professionals in Aberdeenshire highlighted a range of challenges including: effective information-sharing; remaining child-centred in the context of competing agency demands and high workloads; not knowing who to contact in different agencies; not understanding other agencies' remit and roles across a child's Bairns' Hoose journey; and variations in perceptions and assessment of risk across different agencies (Duncan et al., 2025).

### Intended outcomes

Work on multidisciplinary working practices in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose aims to achieve several changes, including:

- There is reduced distress or re-traumatisation for the children and their families through a coordinated multidisciplinary response.
- Children's rights to be heard, seen and safe are upheld by professionals through coordinated multi-agency responses that are appropriate, proportionate, and timely.
- Children experience a seamless service where they receive supports which address their needs at the time that they need them.
- Children know who to speak to and how to ask for help.

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/national-practice-model/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-guidance-child-protection-scotland-2021-updated-2023/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2014/8>

## **Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children**

This section outlines five key assumptions about how stakeholders believe multidisciplinary working in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder will help to bring about change for children.

### **Assumption 1 – improved decision-making and problem-solving**

If effective coordination and collaboration occur between different Bairns' Hoose partner agencies and they have authorisation to try new things – for example through subgroups, tests of change and other partnership working practices – this will increase the quality of decision-making, effectiveness of problem-solving and build professional knowledge and capacity. This in turn will enable professionals to better meet children's needs.

### **Assumption 2 – inter-professional knowledge and coordination**

If professionals from across the workforce have access to joint learning and knowledge exchange activities, this helps them to understand the Bairns' Hoose model, the distinct roles of Bairns' Hoose team members, and how these relate. This in turn will improve how professionals work together and their capacity to understand a child's Bairns' Hoose journey fully.

### **Assumption 3 – single point of contact**

If children and families are allocated a single point of contact through whom they can access ongoing relational support and advocacy, this will help them navigate different processes and systems and ensure they know who they can speak to, to ask questions or raise concerns. Meanwhile other professionals can liaise with the point of contact to share information with children and their families (see also Recovery section).

### **Assumption 4 – reduced requests for children to retell their story**

If all professionals involved with a child and their family are well-informed and know where to access information about a case or its progress through welfare and justice processes, this will minimise the need for children to 'retell' their story. All professionals will work to the principle of seeking informed consent to share information from family members wherever possible, so where appropriate family members are aware of the information that is being shared between professionals.

### **Assumption 5 – centralised collection of data**

If Bairns' Hoose case data is collected and analysed in a central coordinated way (spanning child protection, health, recovery and justice), alongside feedback from children and families, this will support multi-agency understanding of need and inform operational and strategic decision-making. This will also help to identify evidence of impact and outcomes of the Bairns' Hoose model more effectively than single agency data.

## **Progress to date**

There is evidence of a number of activities promoting and improving multidisciplinary working in the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder between February 2024 and September 2025. These include:

- **Effective multidisciplinary working at governance level** characterised by strong relational working practices and building trust through the strategic group and subgroup structures (see Implementation section).
- **The creation of and recruitment to the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator role situated within Children First commencing August 2024.** The Bairns' Hoose Coordinator has supported the redesign and opening of the Kemnay hub, oversight of joint investigative interview (JII) cases, support to individual families at point of JII, and attendance at multi-agency meetings.
- **The development of the initial Bairns' Hoose team** including the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator, recovery workers (ARRs) and the child interview team (social workers and police). This new team operates across different Bairns' Hoose spaces but has its primary base and is coordinated from the hub in Kemnay.
- **Increased use of the Bairns' Hoose hub-and-spoke spaces** for joint investigative interviews supported by the multidisciplinary Bairns' Hoose team, with interviews completed by SCIM team members. Alongside this, recovery workers are available to meet and provide support to families where needed.
- **Development of information-sharing protocols.**
- **Strategies to operationalise the Bairns' Hoose across hub-and-spoke sites**, for example investigating digital solutions to plan meetings and share information.
- **Development of an integrated Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose data collection system** bringing together Children First recovery support data with local authority child protection data.
- **Increasing representation – and a single point of contact – for children and families** in multi-agency welfare and justice processes through the introduction of the Advocacy, Rights and Recovery (ARR) worker role.

*I think, having the advocacy and recovery worker... will play a huge role in holding that child and actually ensuring that they are accessing different supports. Their rights will be upheld because someone actually has responsibility for ensuring their voices are heard. They're being given the information that they need at different points in time and they're accessing appropriate supports along the way. (Professional 5)*

- **Improved communication and training about Bairns' Hoose to multi-agency professionals** through newsletters, information seminars and opportunities to visit the Bairns' Hoose hub.
- **Updates to the interagency referral discussion (IRD) process.** This includes increased use of reconvened IRDs with Bairns' Hoose Coordinator involvement – bringing professionals together where further discussion is needed before decision-making on the need for a child protection planning meeting. The Bairns' Hoose Coordinator's attendance supports their early sight of issues for children who may need further recovery support.

## **Moving forward and areas for development**

The following section highlights a number of challenges or areas for development in relation to the assumptions about multidisciplinary working in Bairns' Hoose.

### Challenge 1: Information-sharing within and between agencies

The Bairns' Hoose vision of seamless, integrated multidisciplinary working depends on effective information-sharing systems and processes. At present there remain challenges for professionals from different agencies in information-sharing which are linked to technical issues (different data systems); the need for data sharing agreements; and different thresholds for sharing information e.g. upholding approaches which balance children's and families' right to privacy with proportionate information-sharing in a child's best interests.

Multidisciplinary working, exemplified by the Bairns' Hoose vision, presents an opportunity for children's needs to be more fully understood, minimising the chance of them being overlooked, becoming invisible or being misinterpreted or misunderstood. While some processes are developing, there is likely to be a need for ongoing thought and attention on this type of integration. Bairns' Hoose presents an opportunity to address some of these challenges at a local level but there is also a recognised need for national commitments from different agencies to agree on and improve information-sharing mechanisms.

### Challenge 2: Multidisciplinary approach to assessment and case discussions

While a number of robust assessment processes are currently in place – such as physical health assessment processes, child and adolescent mental health assessments, advocacy, rights and recovery assessment processes and child protection assessment processes – some remain more siloed within individual agencies. Work has begun on how to create opportunities for more integrated assessment and discussions, or link to the existing assessment landscape (such as children's planning processes), such as the collaboration between the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator and the SCIM teams, and the establishment of a multi-agency, recovery support screening meeting. How this will be built on and sustained longer-term will be an important step in working towards children having a more seamless service experience.

*I think true partnership is actually working together to really understand what a child or young person needs and who is best placed to meet that need, because sometimes there are no obvious solutions. You know, sometimes children don't slip neatly into, 'ah, this is quite clearly this service should be doing this'. Sometimes we need to do a bit of problem-solving around... who's the child most likely to engage with? Who's got the skills to actually support that child?... But those conversations between professionals are not happening... so, they're referring back into a system they don't understand themselves a lot of the time... Sometimes that results in the child ends up being supported by no one or not that well by anyone. So, if we're really going to get it right in Bairns' Hoose, it's not enough that it's just a referral back and forth between services.  
(Professional 5)*

### Challenge 3: Establishing the role of the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator

The Bairns' Hoose Coordinator role is recognised to hold pivotal responsibilities in supporting multi-agency operation of local Bairns' Hoose services. It is anticipated that the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator will be able to provide oversight of children's cases, ensuring children's changing needs remain visible to professionals throughout their welfare and justice pathways, while also holding responsibility for managing the Kemnay hub and recovery team. As a new role within the wider Aberdeenshire service landscape, there will be a need to monitor the role's scope, capacity and impact and a readiness to respond if additional resources or a different remit is required – at the

same time as managing expectations of others about what a Bairns' Hoose Coordinator can or should be doing.

*So there is a hope that Bairns' Hoose and the [Bairns' Hoose] Coordinator's roles... will be [to support] better communication, you know, between... services... That will remain to be seen if that does make a difference or not. I don't know. (Professional 11)*

#### Challenge 4: Integration of Bairns' Hoose with existing systems

Operationalising the Bairns' Hoose will require trying out a range of new or adapted roles and agency inputs. These changes will either be supported by (and supportive of) current systems and practices or they will introduce tensions – and sometimes these two dynamics may be present simultaneously. A key challenge is likely to be understanding how the Bairns' Hoose approach fits in with wider multidisciplinary working (or changes it) across the whole of the child's justice and recovery journey.

*We've got the named person and GIRFEC over here and then we've got this separate system with the rights and advocacy worker or Bairns' Hoose Coordinator also appearing to have a bit of a named person role. And, actually, I think what they are bringing is extremely important because it's – you know, that carrying a child or young person through the process in a way that a head teacher of a school can't because they don't have that, kind of, knowledge and understanding of the system from start to finish. But the two things need to articulate [come together]. (Professional 5)*

#### Challenge 5: Building a secure and confident workforce

Bairns' Hoose aims to enable a workforce who use a common language and consistent practices, hold a shared identity, have good professional relationships and understand the principles, processes and protocols involved in the Bairns' Hoose. Developing this workforce is likely to require a range of activities including joint training, service design, knowledge sharing and ongoing workforce support.

*When people don't know each other's roles, that's when things get really tricky... Joint training is a big factor in it and I would hope that we can get something... you know, kind of, Bairns' Hoose/child protection training... I don't know what we're going to call it yet... Do we call it child protection or do we call it Bairns' Hoose?... It's quite interesting how it's all, sort of, merging together. (Professional 10)*

Different inputs and support will be required for both the immediate multidisciplinary team directly involved in the Bairns' Hoose operations and the wider workforce who may come into contact with the Bairns' Hoose approach.

A further important element of workforce support relates to ensuring all professional's own wellbeing is attended to, promoting their own capacities to respond to children's experiences of trauma. One key challenge will be exploring equitable approaches to professional support across service areas with different pathways or capacity for clinical supervision or reflective practice, the constrained financial context.

*When you are talking about 120-odd support staff, who are not getting supervision, who are dealing with children day in, day out... Supervision is an excellent thing but how do we get it in*

*education across the board as well? I do think it is needed. It is just a resource [issue].*  
(Professional 29)

### **Challenge 6: Supporting multidisciplinary working without the benefits of co-location**

The Aberdeenshire 'hub-and-spoke' model attempts to address a number of challenges in relation to supporting children equitably across a large geographical area. The absence of more comprehensive colocation of staff as part of the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose approach however, brings the additional challenge of how to create an 'under one roof' feeling in relation to multidisciplinary working. At a learning event in November 2025 participants recognised the importance of opportunities for joint workforce development and building relationships between professionals across agencies. Careful consideration will be required going forward in terms of how to ensure this is addressed (see section on Space).

### 3. Voice

(Scottish Bairns' Hoose Standards 1, 5 and 11)

*Children are right at the heart of [Bairns' Hoose], and we shouldn't be doing 'to' them, they should be helping us construct what this looks like. (Professional 4)*

#### Current context

The umbrella term 'voice' is used within Aberdeenshire Pathfinder to refer to the promotion of children's participation rights. Specifically, 'voice' refers to efforts to support improved listening to children and families, ensuring professional decision-making is informed by children's and families' views and maximising their meaningful choice and influence during welfare and justice processes. These efforts relate to both children's individual and collective influence on decision-making.

Prior research indicates children, young people and families tend to feel poorly informed and unable to influence welfare and justice processes following identification of violence or abuse (SCTS, 2015; Houghton and MacDonald, 2018; Mitchell et al. 2023; 2024; and 2025). These dynamics are recognised to exacerbate children's experience of loss of control and the potential for re-traumatisation. While some strong examples of participatory practice are recognised in third sector services and aspects of social care, many statutory services, including elements of health, police and the prosecution service, have been criticised for less child-centred approaches (Houghton et al., 2022). The desire to embed children's participation is recognised as part of a wider national culture shift, aligned to 'the Promise' (Independent Care Review, 2021), and incorporation of the UNCRC. Within the national Bairns' Hoose Standards (Healthcare Improvement Scotland, 2023) there is a strong emphasis on ensuring service development and individual practice is informed by children's and families' perspectives and needs. Meanwhile, locally the introduction of the Scottish Child Interview Model has been seen as an example of this culture shift.

*I think [the Scottish Child Interview Model] has really changed the way practitioners work with children and actually really listen to them... We seem to be hearing the voices of children more than probably what we used to. (Professional 1)*

However local Bairns' Hoose partners also acknowledge ways that practice can fail to capture and respond to children's and families' own perspectives.

*We've been getting on with the doing the 'do [with children]' rather than... 'and what was it like for you?' (Professional 28)*

*There have been areas where, you know, children... have not really understood and families haven't understood what's happening to them. (Professional 10)*

*As a group of professionals, we will say, 'well, this child is safe because we've kept them from this individual or that individual or we've, you know, put supports in for the family'. But actually, we don't know if that child feels safe. And I think there's a difference in what safety means to us and what safety means to a child. (Professional 19)*

## Intended outcomes

Work on 'voice' in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose aims to achieve changes including:

- Children and their families are well-informed and have good understanding of professional processes.
- Children needs and perspectives are listened to and better understood by professionals, and these needs are represented and championed in all professional settings.
- Children can access advocacy to support representation of their needs in different systems where required, in turn increasing their confidence that their voice and views can lead to tangible difference and change.
- Professionals are accountable to children and families through strong communication and feedback channels.
- Children feel more in control, have more choices and experience less distress or re-traumatisation within child protection and justice processes
- Embedding feedback loops so that children and families' experiences and voice informs continuous improvement of multi-agency working.

## Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children

This section outlines five key assumptions about how stakeholders believe promoting children's and families' participation ('voice') in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose pathfinder will help to bring about change for children.

### Assumption 1 – children are listened to, taken seriously and given choices

If Bairns' Hoose embeds a rights-based culture where children feel listened to and taken seriously at all stages of their journey, and they have meaningful choices wherever possible, this will deepen children's and families' sense of control and of being respected. It will also increase their confidence that professionals take their views into account when making decisions and ensure children are more likely to access services aligned to their needs.

*Recovery is about, from the very beginning a child being given a voice, feeling that they have been listened to, feeling that they have been respected, feeling that they're taken seriously.  
(Professional 15)*

### Assumption 2 – individual feedback

If there is a robust, agreed approach to sensitively and systematically collecting feedback from all children and families, their feedback can be analysed and used to build accountability and ensure services are improved and responsive to their experiences. In addition, if children and families understand how their feedback is used, they will feel listened to and valued and know feedback processes are meaningful.

*I think in terms of feedback, it's so important. Because we can all sit down as professionals and think what we could do better to benefit the children. But we don't truly know if it's having the desired impact on children, until we hear their voice, and get that feedback from them... it's a continuing process, and we just need to think, when is the best time, and what's the best method in which to then gather that feedback. (Professional 31)*

### Assumption 3 – ongoing co-production of service development

If strategic decision-making and service development are informed by ongoing co-production with children and families with lived experience – both individually and collectively - this ensures services are better able to respond to children’s needs in the future and improves accountability.

### Assumption 4 – being better-informed aids recovery

If professionals are enabled to share clear, accurate and timely information (in different formats) about all elements of the Bairns’ Hoose journey then children and families will feel properly informed, more in control, less anxious and more able to make informed choices (where choice is possible) about their journey.

*We have certainly recognised the need for children to be more informed about what the process will look like. (Professional 3)*

### Assumption 5 – improving training for professionals around communication with children

If support to interviewers and recovery workers increases (from speech and language therapy, and through specialised training), then children will be better supported to communicate their views and experiences. This will increase opportunities for more children’s voices to be heard.

## Progress to date

There is evidence of a number of activities promoting and improving children’s participation (‘voice’) in the Aberdeenshire Bairns’ Hoose Pathfinder between February 2024 and September 2025. These include:

- **Bairns’ Hoose coordinator and three recovery workers (ARRs) in post** with remit to support representation of children’s views as part of their roles (and advocacy in case of the recovery workers). In response to some of the logistical challenges of covering a wide geographical area, one recovery worker has been employed with a remit to operate from Peterhead and cover the northern part of the local authority.
- **The application of the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) has embedded an increase in seeking feedback** from children and families.
- **Strategic group meetings have embedded children’s testimony as a standing item** – collected and shared by Children First staff at the opening of each meeting. This testimony has helped ground subsequent discussions in children’s experiences.

*We always start with a voice of a child or young person, which I always find really, I find it really powerful when you hear it... It’s really fresh, it’s there in your, and it’s in your head the whole time. And you’re thinking, oh, we’re talking about this, and I’ve just listened to that story about how many court dates were cancelled, how horrendous that felt. How poorly that was communicated. (Professional 20)*

- **Establishment of a ‘voice’ subgroup (spanning Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Pathfinders)** to support focused work on embedding participation principles across the pathfinder.
- **Improved or additional systems to gather feedback from children.** This has included prompt questions being added to IRD templates to check children’s and families’ views have been actively

sought, and development of an approach to seeking feedback from families of children attending forensic medicals.

- **Co-production activities to support children’s input on the design of the Bairns’ Hoose space,** and information about Bairns’ Hoose for children and families.
- **Establishment of a local Changemakers group** (children and young people with expertise based on relevant lived experience) to support future input and consultation about Bairns’ Hoose service development.
- **Children and young people’s involvement in the recruitment of Bairns’ Hoose recovery workers.**
- **SCIM interviewers and recovery workers undertaking ‘Talking Mats’ training** to better support children with communication difficulties to express their views.
- **Work with Speech and Language Therapy to support consistent use of image-based communication tools** to enhance involvement of children with additional needs or communication difficulties.

*We definitely are trying our best to make sure that we have got things that is based, pitched at the right sort of level, reading ages... I am going to speech and language next week and they are going to do me a communications board so children who are struggling verbally will be able to provide feedback as well. (Professional 11)*

## **Moving forward and areas for development**

The following section highlights a number of challenges or areas for development in relation to the assumptions about promoting children’s ‘voice’ in Bairns’ Hoose.

### **Challenge 1: Ensuring children have information about every step of their journey and are clear about their choices**

Professionals recognised the need for children to be accurately informed about what will happen to them and their case at every step of their journey. This is often challenging when professionals themselves do not have knowledge and/or information about the different systems with which the child will come into contact. There is also a need for any information to be tailored to the diverse communication needs of children.

### **Challenge 2: Ensuring feedback processes are consistently embedded across a multidisciplinary system (see multidisciplinary working section)**

Significant developments for capturing children’s feedback have happened in the first year of Aberdeenshire Bairns’ Hoose in relation to specific aspects of children’s experiences. Despite these welcome initiatives there is widespread recognition that feedback from children and families’ is still not collected and responded to in an integrated, consistent or systematic manner. This is an identified priority area for the next phase of Bairns’ Hoose development.

*I guess I hope that there’s some sort of process and some understanding of when we capture voice, but also what that really means. And I think it’s really important to hear the stories, but it’s not to forget them either and how do you hold onto them? (Professional 10)*

*You could argue that we've, we've spoke to children since day dot... we just culturally need to get better at recognising that we're doing it, but recording it. (Professional 22)*

*I think there is still a further way to go within the justice element around how children's voices are treated. (Professional 7)*

### Challenge 3: Ensuring strategic decisions and service design are genuinely informed by children's experiences – translating voice into action

There is recognition that the commitment to consulting with children and families, individually and collectively, needs to be more transparently linked to strategic decision-making. While professionals recognised that some strategic decisions are informed by children's testimony and experiences, there are other areas where professionals were less clear if plans responded to children's needs.

*You know, they're using documentation to say, 'here's the test of change'. Maybe just add in a question in there 'what have children and families told us that makes us believe that this needs to change?'... How are we linking what we're hearing and what we're changing?... You know, do you have the mandate from the child about why you're changing this? (Professional 24)*

### Challenge 4: Ensuring all children feel equally listened to in relation to their individual care and justice experiences

It is recognised that the model of support will vary for every child, and not all children will access support from an Advocacy Rights and Recovery (ARR) worker. For children without a recovery worker, it will be important to ensure these children's needs and experiences are equally heard and advocated for by other professionals in their Bairns' Hoose journey. Building consistency across fragmented systems will require close attention.

*I was doing audits of records and I just felt, we're not recording the voice. We might be capturing it, we might be asking them how they feel, but are we capturing it effectively in our reports or our record keeping? And in particular, reports that go to child protection. (Professional 22)*

### Challenge 5: Enabling safe and representative consultation with children and families

Encouraging feedback from children while also reducing pressure on children to retell their stories is acknowledged to present challenges. In addition, identifying those children for whom opportunities for collective consultation are appropriate can also be challenging.

*The whole purpose of Bairns' Hoose is that [children] tell a story once... But then we need that feedback to keep making things better. But how do we do that when our whole ethos is, let's minimise the amount of times this child or young person has to tell their story and rehash this. (Professional 20)*

The in-depth consultations with children led by Children First and the Changemaker model were seen as real strengths, but it is also acknowledged that this model needs resources and strong commitment to sustain. An additional challenge identified by professionals is that this model of participation can only ever include representation from a small minority of children and families.

*I think we talk about we want to ensure that the rights and the voices of children are at the heart of all we do. I don't believe anybody isn't committed to that... It's not easy from a complexity perspective, because you don't want just to be overwhelming the same children time and time again, with asking them for giving their views on voices. (Professional 7)*

### **Challenge 6: Setting ambitious and realistic targets for children's influence and participation**

Overly simplistic conceptions of what it means to involve children and families in decision-making can prevail. This can result in the scope of children's input being reduced to potentially superficial decision-making or overlooking a reality where some decision-making will necessarily exclude children's input. The challenge is therefore ensuring children's perspectives meaningfully inform decision-making and service design, while being transparent about processes where decisions may be made without children or families' involvement.

*There's going to be times in the police that, look... We're listening to your view, but, you know, we've got a job to do as well. But I can see them being more involved in, I guess, outcomes, I suppose. Or how we go about our business and feedback and listening to their feedback, I guess. (Professional 22)*

## 4. Space – ‘hub-and-spoke’ model

(Bairns’ Hoose Standards 4 and 7)

### Current context

Space is a key component of the Bairns’ Hoose model. This recognises the value of child-centred trauma-informed design, enabling children to engage with potentially difficult professional interactions in calm, comfortable and non-institutional feeling spaces (Lamb, forthcoming). While a typical approach to developing the Barnahus model (on which Bairns’ Hoose is based) has been to develop services within a single building, the Aberdeenshire Pathfinder is developing a hub-and-spoke model which considers the large geographical area the local authority encompasses. It operates from a stand-alone, purpose-renovated hub in Kemnay, a small village in central Aberdeenshire, with a further six family centres being prioritised as ‘spokes’ or satellite sites in the towns of Banff, Turriff, Peterhead, Huntly, Ellon and Stonehaven (see Figure 3). The family centres are used by children and families social work teams, and all the buildings are owned by the local authority.

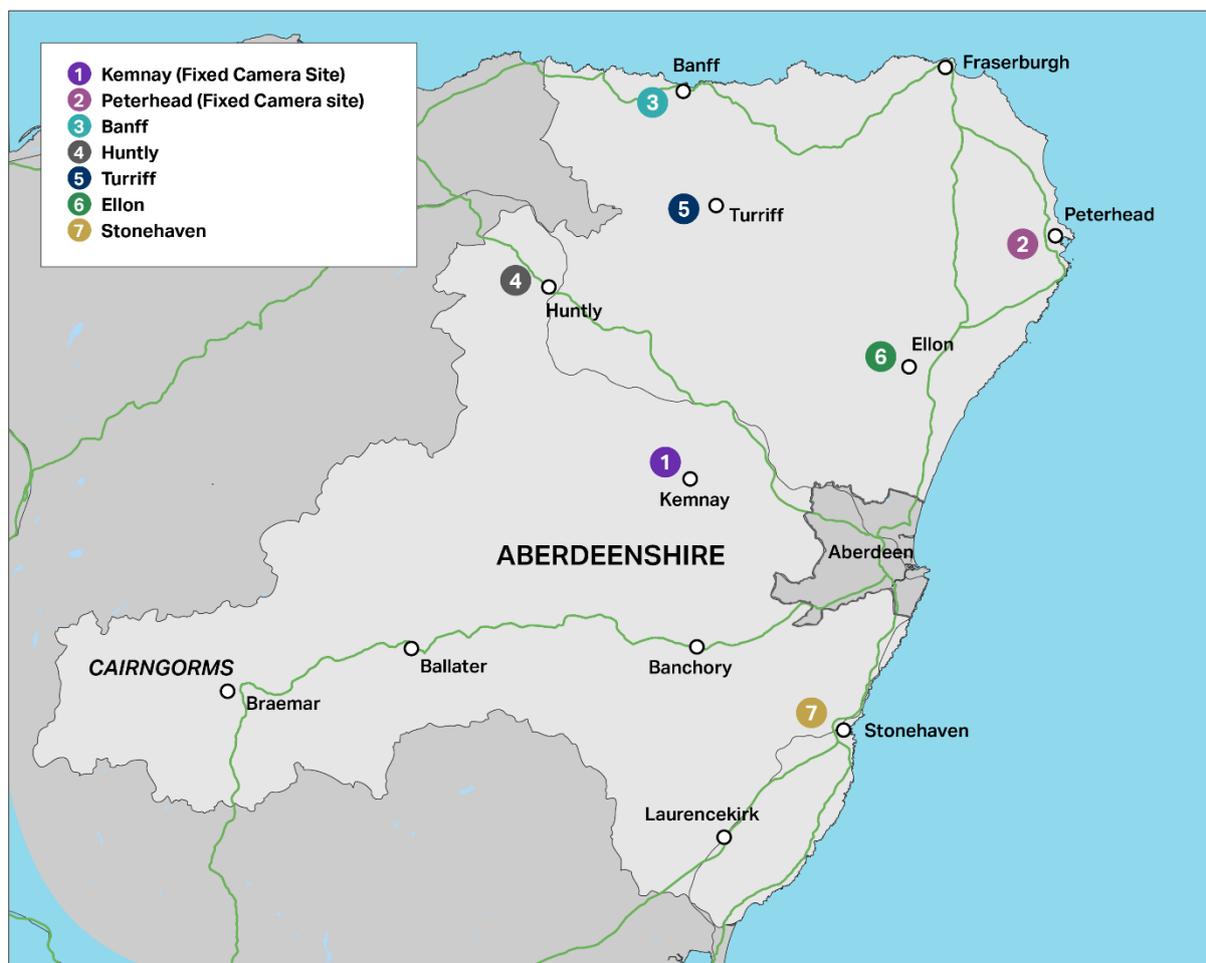


Figure 3: Map of Aberdeenshire hub-and-spoke locations

Prior to Bairns’ Hoose, joint investigative interviews with children typically took place in schools or at police headquarters. This was recognised not to serve children well. For example, practitioners

shared accounts of children being asked to disclose difficult information in a headteacher's office, with disturbances from people accidentally walking into the room or a school bell ringing, and recurring issues around poor soundproofing of rooms. Entering a police station and seeing uniformed officers was also acknowledged to be intimidating and problematic for children.

For children who undergo medical examinations, these currently take place within the Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital. Forensic medicals will continue here in the immediate term, but there are plans in development for forensic medicals to take place in Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose rather than the hospital, and an offer that this option could also be made available for children in Aberdeenshire given the agreement to operate a 'soft boundaries' policy to prioritise children's needs. Meanwhile, use of the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose spaces for other health and wellbeing services is currently under consideration.

In relation to court, in Aberdeenshire there is a dearth of child-friendly spaces suitable for children to live link into courts. This means that children and other vulnerable witnesses continue to be required to attend more formal court spaces.

## **Intended outcomes**

Work on space in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose aims to achieve changes including:

- Children and their families are able to come to a trauma-informed, familiar space for more of their safety, justice, health and recovery needs.
- Children can access a child-friendly, private, soundproofed, safe and trauma-informed interview space and areas where they can receive support and information comfortably.
- Children have a choice about where to be interviewed.

## **Core assumptions – how our plans will for create change for children**

This section outlines four key assumptions about how stakeholders believe changes to buildings and professional environments ('space') in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose will help to bring about change for children.

### **Assumption 1 – safe, comfortable familiar space aids recovery and engagement**

If children have access to safe, welcoming, informal and calm spaces to meet with a range of professionals, it will support them to engage, feel valued, and reduce distress. The Bairns' Hoose hub-and-spoke environments will also offer a containing space for families so they feel better equipped to support their child.

### **Assumption 2 – the space supports better quality evidence**

If Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose provides spaces for investigative interviews which are purpose-built, safe, calm and welcoming, this will maximise children's and staff's comfort and sense of privacy and minimise distractions – enabling children to share their best possible evidence. Soundproofing and equipment will help ensure the highest quality of evidence is recorded, increasing the chance that the recording can be used as evidence in justice processes.

*Yeah, and it'll inevitably have a good outcome for the child as well, if they're in a more relaxed, secure environment, that's got the meeting standards. The information they're conveying will be,*

*hopefully, better, and will help in the long term, in terms of their recovery, any justice process that then follows as well. (Professional 26)*

### Assumption 3 – choice of space supports children’s rights

If Aberdeenshire provides a hub-and-spoke Bairns’ Hoose model this will provide children with choice and flexibility about how local or familiar they would like the setting to be for meeting Bairns’ Hoose professionals. This will also maximise opportunities for children to access some services close to their homes if they wish.

*[Improved spaces are] invaluable for the kid’s experience of the interview, and even for the practitioners, who are going in there... doing a difficult job. (Professional 25).*

### Assumption 4 – enhanced space supports staff

If staff have access to welcoming, calm, well-designed and well-equipped spaces that meet their professional needs, it will help them feel valued and supported in undertaking difficult work, promoting their wellbeing and relationship-building with other professionals.

*And I think we said that about staff wellbeing, didn’t we, and we said, you know, if you’re not using the space for interviews, go and do your supervision in there, like, really think about investing in your staff that are dealing with really difficult things. You know, think about this being therapeutic for everybody that has to work in those spaces. So, I mean, I see my staff hugely investing in the spaces now (Professional 15)*

## Progress to date

There is evidence of a number of activities aimed at promoting and improving Aberdeenshire Bairns’ Hoose spaces between February 2024 and September 2025. These include:

- **A trauma-informed ‘walk through’ of each potential ‘spoke’ site** assessed spaces in relation to Bairns’ Hoose standards and the potential experience for children. This supported early identification of unsuitable sites. Ongoing assessment as they are used will continue to inform suitability of these spaces.
- **A renovated, purposefully designed Bairns’ Hoose hub has opened at Kemnay, operational since April 2025.** The space offers rooms for investigative interviews and provides children and families direct entry to a welcoming kitchen instead of a waiting room, as well as private spaces where families can be supported while a child is being interviewed.
- **Renovation of spaces across all sites** used for investigative interviews has been completed. Rooms are now more suitable for a wider age range of children. Fixed video-recorded interview equipment has been installed in two sites – Kemnay and Peterhead.

*And [professionals] also reflect... now saying it just feels far more geared up to kind of, older children, or you know, that it looks well looked after, well cared for, you know, invested in. So that’s just been really nice to hear. (Professional 15)*

- **Collaborative decision-making in spoke renovations has supported relationship-building between Bairns’ Hoose recovery workers and local social work teams.** This has helped shine a spotlight on the spokes in a positive way and helped build knowledge, enthusiasm and support for the model.

*Staff now can see what or can have a bit of a feeling of what Bairns' Hoose is, and what we're working towards. So, a lot of the work we've been trying to do to bring people along with in that process, hopefully, sort of, is being done by people being in, now working in those spaces, and feeling those spaces. (Professional 15)*

- **Opportunities for professionals to visit Kemnay has increased engagement with wider agencies,** sparking discussions about how this site could be used by other agencies such as the child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS).
- **Investigative interviews and recovery work are now taking place across the new sites.** There has been positive feedback from professionals using these spaces.

*When I used to do the interviews, and going into, often, like police stations, and things like that, it was very traumatic for children. And even as the thing progressed, we would do it in schools, but the police always came in uniform, you know. And they would take their uniforms off, but there was a police car at the door, so it was quite intimidating for children... The change is just vast, absolutely vast. And Kemnay, obviously, is our ideal place. But because Aberdeenshire is so vast, it's very difficult to always just use there. But each centre has got vastly improved facilities now, and its chalk and cheese. (Professional 32)*

- **Reliance on schools for investigative interviews has reduced** following a test of change which was undertaken to invite more children to interviews off school grounds in the Bairns' Hoose (see Justice section). Kemnay and Peterhead, the two centres with fixed site cameras, are being prioritised for use, with local schools very supportive of this shift.
- **Children's and family's involvement in the improvement and redesign process** is maximising comfort, calm and reducing the clinical or institutional feel of spaces.
- **Development of a programme of further planned works designed to improve the hub-and-spoke spaces.** This includes creation of a therapeutic garden in Kemnay, further renovation work at the Peterhead family centre, and consideration of how the spaces can be optimised to facilitate use by health and other agencies.

*A little, young person that was kind of, struggling to just sit in a space. So, out went the watering can, and was watering the big, you know, four-foot plants that are at the front door, whilst having that wee chat. It's those little bits that, you know, seeing the young people coming in, and the minute that the door's opened, seeing, right this is different, this feels different, this looks different. (Professional 33).*

- **Work is underway to establish a court link room at Kemnay.** This will provide a live link to courts and the commission suite in Aberdeen, offering the potential for children to use one of two Bairns' Hoose sites – Kemnay or Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose – to attend future trials or provide pre-recorded evidence (Evidence by Commissioner). Link rooms may also offer the potential for use by family members who have to give evidence.

## **Moving forward and areas for development**

The following section highlights a number of challenges or areas for development in relation to the assumptions about space in the Bairns' Hoose.

### Challenge 1: Ensuring equity of service across different types of spaces

The hub-and-spoke model poses challenges for delivering equity of service to children accessing different spaces. This links to a wider question being considered locally and nationally about how to ensure children living in more rural and geographically distant areas are given an equitable Bairns' Hoose service.

*I struggle with the vision of hubs and spokes and what that looks like and what ensuring that children are given an equal experience and they're not... their experience isn't impacted by geography or location or ability to get to a building. (Professional 9)*

*What I think is, if we create a really good hub, we create the evidence or for the need to replicate that in its purity rather than dilute it through a less pure model within a spoke. Does that make sense? (Professional 9)*

There are a number of ways this could be experienced. Mobile recording equipment used in the spokes may not offer the same quality of investigative interview as those carried out in the fixed site(s). Ensuring a private space for families alongside the designated child's interview room may add further challenges from a logistical or privacy perspective within spokes, and offer less freedom of use by children and families in comparison to the hub at Kemnay. Spoke sites will not be equally equipped to offer certain health tasks, and there will be reduced opportunities for co-location of professionals, potentially affecting multidisciplinary working practices.

### Challenge 2: Managing resource implications of working across a large geographical area

The significant distance between the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose hub-and-spoke sites and other services means greater demands on staff in terms of staff capacity and travel costs. This has compromised early commitments by Children First to be able to offer direct recovery (ARR) support to all children attending an investigative interview, while meeting wider recovery work commitments across the local authority area. Possible strategies to respond to this challenge include a 'duty' system<sup>12</sup> and attempts to reduce staff travel by containing casework allocation to staff in designated sub-areas of the local authority.

*We've got workers travelling for over an hour to do an hour's recovery work, for over an hour back. And yet, and we've got a steady stream of children needing support at interview, and recovery work. So, it's a real challenge, I think. (Professional 15).*

### Challenge 3: Ensuring long-term sustainability of the Bairns' Hoose hub in Kemnay

The Bairns' Hoose spokes in Aberdeenshire use buildings already in use by other local authority services and therefore do not contribute to additional overhead costs beyond targeted renovation work. Kemnay, however, is a purpose-renovated building solely in use as a Bairns' Hoose hub. Although the building is part of the local authority estate, there are concerns about how this space will be sustained financially in the longer term. Arguably, if the Bairns' Hoose model is recognised as a truly collaborative, cross-disciplinary service, support for the space should not be shouldered solely by the local authority, but current commitments to the building from wider agencies remain unclear.

---

<sup>12</sup> A 'duty' system or team refers to a model in which new or urgent referrals can be responded to before they are allocated to an individual named case worker.

#### Challenge 4: Collecting data about how the Bairns' Hoose spaces are used and experienced

Understanding children's needs in relation to space requires focused data collection. While there has been some use of existing child protection data to map children's needs, there is recognition that more data – such as children's choices on where to undertake an investigative interview - is needed to tailor service development and understand the current use of resources.



**Interview room in Peterhead Family Centre**

## 5. Recovery

(Bairns' Hoose Standards 8 and 9)

### Current context

Recovery or mental health support is recognised as one of four main 'rooms' of the international Barnahus model on which Bairns' Hoose is based and a child's right to recovery is recognised in Article 39 of the UNCRC.

'Recovery support' has historically been one of the most poorly resourced aspects of responding to children's needs after harm and abuse in Scotland, with provision of therapeutic or mental health support reliant on a 'patchwork' or 'postcode lottery' of support with many specialist services subject to procurement and outside statutory provision (Galloway et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2023; 2024; and 2025). A survey of multidisciplinary professionals undertaken across Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire identified widespread concerns about the availability of recovery support for children following a report of abuse, particularly in the longer term (Duncan et al., 2025).

An enduring challenge has been the varied ways recovery has been conceptualised. This ranges from whole family relational support, advocacy and mentoring to more clinical approaches, with different views on which partners should lead this work and a recognition that new services may also need to be developed or commissioned (Harewood, 2025). These concerns and challenges are reflected locally amongst strategic partners in Aberdeenshire.

For Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose, children's recovery is understood as both a process and a goal. Recovery is seen to be both a 'whole system' responsibility, involving all partners, but may also require the need for dedicated specialist interventions.

### Intended outcomes

Work on recovery in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose aims to achieve a range of changes including:

- Children's mental and physical health needs are recognised and understood through assessment.
- Children and their non-abusing family members have access to a consistent offer of accessible and timely mental and physical health and recovery services when needed.
- Appropriate support and responses to children and non-abusing family members are maximised through coordination of mental and physical health and recovery services with social work and justice professionals.
- Children are less likely (than previously) to experience distress or re-traumatisation within child protection and justice processes due to a clear support offer, appropriate and accessible communication, trauma-informed personnel, and reduced delays or adjournments in court proceedings.
- Children and their whole families will be provided with holistic, family-centred support that addresses emotional, psychological, and practical needs after trauma which will strengthen trust between families and professionals, improving engagement and outcomes in recovery.

## Core recovery assumptions – how our plans will create change for children

This section outlines six key assumptions about how stakeholders believe changes to recovery provision in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose pathfinder will help to bring about change for children.

### Assumption 1 – everyone contributes to recovery

When Bairns' Hoose stakeholders recognise that it is everyone's job to support children's recovery, understand their role in this, and are supported to apply a basic understanding of trauma-informed and responsive provision, every part of the Bairns' Hoose system will promote children's wellbeing alongside more dedicated recovery services.

### Assumption 2 – comprehensive, tailored offer of recovery support

If the provision of recovery support spans a range of offers to children in Aberdeenshire it will be able to meet diverse children's needs and provide support where needed. Coordinated recovery support will range from universal support services (e.g. pupil support assistants) to whole family support (e.g. allocated social workers) to specialist therapeutic or advocacy support (e.g. Children First, Advocacy, Rights and Recovery workers, CAMHS).

Access to the ARR recovery service, a flexible, tailored recovery service that allows for children's engagement (or re-engagement) at a later date, will help promote accessibility, contain children's and families' anxieties, and provide reassurance and access to support when needed.

*I think it is different for each young person. We could all experience the same traumatic event and have very different responses to it because of our own background, our own childhood, our own resilience, our own family system round about us. So, I think what recovery looks like depends on the family system, the family's, the child's response, the network of support round about them. And I think it is really hard to be proscribed in terms of 'this is what a recovery pathway looks like for everyone'. (Professional 30)*

### Assumption 3 – understanding recovery needs and who can meet them

If professionals know who to speak to for advice or to enable children's access to wider support, and also understand their own role in supporting children's recovery, this will reduce or avoid inappropriate referrals and help children access appropriate interventions in a timely manner (see also section on multidisciplinary working).

### Assumption 4 – empowering recovery through capacity building within families and existing networks of support?

If families have access to recovery support for their own needs and are 'upskilled' to respond to their child's distress and offer emotional containment, this will ensure interventions to support children's recovery are sustained and more effective. This recognises the critical role that families can play in supporting children and ensures that when professional involvement ends, children's ongoing support needs are met within their own social and family networks. Furthermore, it is hoped that support to families will address intergenerational trauma, directly addressing some families own recovery needs.

*I would say, a huge theme, it is the parents that are the ones needing the support and advice. (Professional 34)*

*We need to build that safety, stability, security, certainty, that families are ready to hold this. Because if we were to then assess that it requires individual therapeutic work with children, ... there will be a bit of unravelling of children, they'll need to have that safe space to come home to. (Professional 9)*

### Assumption 5 – recovery support from the outset will sustain a child in their justice journey

If children and families with high levels of need have access to advocacy, rights and recovery (ARR) support from the point of the investigative interview, this will improve assessment and engagement with ongoing justice and recovery interventions. The presence of the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator or a recovery worker at a joint investigative interview will build the recovery worker's knowledge and understanding of children's experiences and ensure the child's holistic needs informs the 'recovery offer' which follows.

*Before I moved over to Bairns' Hoose, I never really thought about it, using the language 'recovery'... We knew... that children were presenting with really difficult communication, difficult behaviours. They were really dysregulated and sometimes they were known to services, sometimes they weren't. But we didn't always know what had happened to them or what they had been through. Whereas it feels very different in Bairns' Hoose because we do know... So I definitely think about it more, about trauma recovery... It does feel like I am seeing it in a different way. (Professional 15)*

### Assumption 6 – assessment

If professionals employ a standardised process for assessment of children's recovery needs, it will support equitable access to appropriate support. This will also help develop an understanding of levels and spread of need, and support prioritisation of limited recovery resources across the local authority area.

*It is about understanding the different resources that are available and looking at that kind of early intervention pathway, because it has to be proportionate. And I guess it is up to either social work or the recovery workers to assess what is the proportionate response at that time based on all of the information that they know. (Professional 30)*

## Progress to date

There is evidence of a number of activities aimed at promoting and improving children's recovery needs in the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder between February 2024 and September 2025. These include:

- **Funding and recruitment of three Children First Advocacy, Rights and Recovery (ARR) roles and one Children First Bairns' Hoose Coordinator.**
- **Opening of the Bairns' Hoose hub in Kemnay with a base for the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator and space for recovery work.**
- **Developing relationships between the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator and local social work teams.**
- **New processes enabling the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator and recovery workers (ARRs) to support children's attendance at joint investigative interviews** and/or offer children and their families longer-term support following the interview. This includes: Bairns' Hoose Coordinator attending weekly SCIM (police/social work) meeting which aids planning of Bairns' Hoose recovery support

offer; newly-established fortnightly multiagency screening meeting looking at recovery support needs and offers to children and families; and in-person Bairns' Hoose team meeting every second month with all SCIM interviewers and managers, recovery workers, health coordinator and speech and language therapy.

*We have got Bairns' Hoose support in place now. Almost from immediately after the IRD, prior to the joint interview in terms of... explaining to a family what the support could look like even in the interim of 'we can get you to the interview, we can be there, and present for breaks... And then post that, checking in after the interview'. Which I am not sure... well it definitely wasn't being done all of the time I would say, before that. (Professional 34)*

- **Since November 2024 recovery workers have been supporting caseloads** of children identified as wanting or needing recovery support. Their offer of support includes:
  - information about available support
  - practical 'general' support, which may include help to attend a joint investigative interview (JII)
  - attending a JII to offer support to the parent or carer
  - follow-up 'check-in' with a child (after JII)
  - holistic assessment of needs
  - one-to-one sessions with a child to focus on 'recovery support' (may include psycho-educative work, practical help and advocacy)
  - supporting families to support their child
- **Active engagement with CAMHS to support the recovery offer.** This includes CAMHS' review of cases to understand the possible links between their caseload and Bairns' Hoose children.
- **Development of an emerging shared vision of key characteristics of effective recovery support,** provided by a combination of specialist and universal services. This includes:
  - promotion of information and choice to children and families, ensuring children and families have information about processes they're expected to engage with and understand choices available to them, including where and how their information is shared.
  - practical support (for children and/or parents/carers) to attend meetings, interviews or court dates, particularly where geography or family circumstances may present a barrier.
  - promotion of children's and families' influence, by providing opportunities for children and families to express their needs, give feedback, define outcomes that matter to them and use this as the basis for a support plan.
  - psycho-educative inputs to build children's and families' understanding of how trauma may affect them, helping them understand and manage how they think and feel, and to normalise their feelings and coping mechanisms.
  - systemic and family-inclusive approaches to build the resources of those caring for children to understand, contain, cope with and respond to children's trauma.
  - supporting children to process what has happened to them - to safely talk, feel, think or reflect about what's happened to them through conversation, listening or other therapeutic processes in order to prevent children feeling 'stuck' with difficult feelings they can't share or engage with.

## Moving forward and areas for development

The following section highlights a number of challenges or areas for development in relation to the assumptions about delivering recovery support for children in Bairns' Hoose.

### Challenge 1: Delivering equitable recovery services across a large rural locality

There is growing understanding about the impact that geography has on staff resources to deliver face-to-face recovery work. Examples of one-hour sessions for young people requiring up to four hours of staff time including travel highlighted this challenge. Practical challenges of ensuring staff have suitable vehicles to travel to remote rural settings (particularly in winter months) and finding venues to meet children in were also noted. This limits the ability of staff to respond to requests for support and affects workers' capacity to see children. The need for clear processes and criteria to prioritise advocacy, rights and recovery resources was noted to be particularly important.

*Wouldn't have had any idea when I started, the challenge that [the geography] would bring. I mean right down to me looking at the workers' cars going 'I don't think that car is fit for purpose'. It is all those things that even Children First hadn't, really, thought about. (Professional 15)*

Geography has also been reported to affect access to other recovery services, with CAMHS noting they no longer have resources to travel to children as part of their service delivery (also see section on Space).

### Challenge 2: Enabling collaboration across statutory and third sector partners

The fact that the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator works in the third sector (Children First) means that certain standard information-sharing protocols and opportunities (such as attendance at the IRD) are not automatically available to them. This is recognised as having an impact on the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator's knowledge and oversight of cases. In addition, the relationship between CAMHS and the Bairns' Hoose (including to advocacy, rights and recovery support) remains in the early stage of development. Active engagement with CAMHS since spring 2025 appears to be creating opportunities to explore and develop this role but further work is needed.

### Challenge 3: Assessing children's needs

Across both Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City, there is a significant gap in current plans regarding the absence of a standardised approach to assessment of recovery needs. This is a challenge facing Scotland nationally. Ensuring the right support is provided to the right children, at the right time, is recognised to require a multidisciplinary assessment process to form the basis for professional decision-making about referral to services. Similarly, a clear assessment about the level and type of need will be a necessary part of understanding resourcing needs and aspects of services such as waiting lists or triaging cases. Assessing needs is also noted to be particularly difficult in the case of children whose needs are less visible, for example if they internalise their responses to trauma.

*... [ensuring] the quieter kids [who appear] fine on the surface but who are probably not coping very well in their journey' [are not missed]. (Professional 25)*

### Challenge 4: Managing limited advocacy, rights and recovery (ARR) resources alongside a commitment to a flexible and responsive offer

Bairns' Hoose advocacy, rights and recovery (ARR) support in Aberdeenshire has now reached the point where there is a waiting list. This means that the commitment to provide long-term flexible

support for families who require it at the point of need is creating tensions in relation to staff capacity to offer 'new' children and families support. Strategies for managing this will require both consideration of the assessment processes mentioned above, to support triaging, and consideration of how best to draw on wider support resources and make decisions about closing cases.

*It is hard, because you know some of these recovery pieces are not quick and so there can be a real stuckness for a period of time and that is where the resource becomes weighed down because you have got families that you know you can't move on... I think that kind of creates a kind of bulge in the middle. I don't know how we can overcome that... I just feel like we don't know that yet. (Professional 15)*

### **Challenge 5: Mapping services and understanding the role of different types of recovery support**

Recovery support remains a variably used and contested term. Better allocation (and justification) of recovery resources will rely on developing a shared understanding of what is meant by children's recovery needs and how different types of intervention align to these, as well as a comprehensive understanding of current provision of support available across Aberdeenshire. This is likely to require knowledge exchange to support a shared understanding across clinical and non-clinical provision, and mapping to identify where and how services currently respond to these needs.

## 6. Health

(Bairns' Hoose Standards 8 and 9)

### Current context

Health is one of the four key offers or 'rooms' of the Bairns' Hoose model. Children's health needs after violence and abuse will vary, spanning multiple different services, and interplay with their wider safety, recovery and justice needs. Under the umbrella of 'health', there are multiple services with relevance for supporting child victims of violence and abuse. Key health components of the Bairns' Hoose model being considered in Aberdeenshire include: medical examinations (comprehensive and forensic), speech and language support, school nursing, and child and adolescent mental health support. Health care for children is provided by the local health board, NHS Grampian, which serves both Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City. Delivery of health within the Bairns' Hoose is subsequently significantly affected by the commitment to operate 'soft boundaries' across the two Pathfinders.

Children's initial contact with health support in a Bairns' Hoose pathway may include some form of medical examination. In Scotland there are two types of medical examination which may take place after a disclosure of abuse: a forensic medical examination,<sup>13</sup> and a (non-forensic) comprehensive medical assessment (Scottish Government, 2023). Forensic and comprehensive medicals currently take place at the Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital.

While forensic medical examinations are understood to be required in a minority of cases, comprehensive medical assessments may be undertaken with a larger cohort, such as in the case of chronic neglect, other unmet health needs or historic sexual abuse. Comprehensive medical assessments are undertaken to identify wider health or treatment needs and can help to address (and ideally ease) children's and families' concerns about the health impacts of abuse (Stefansen et al., 2024). Decision-making regarding the requirement for a comprehensive medical assessment relies on professional judgement rather than any standard protocol (Scottish Government, 2023). In the period October 2024 to September 2025, 18 medicals (forensic or comprehensive) were undertaken for children in Aberdeenshire in response to child protection concerns (Source: Aberdeenshire Local Authority).

Beyond medical examinations, there appears to be less clarity about the scope of the Bairns' Hoose health offer. This may, in part, be due health services not having to respond to safeguarding and child protection concerns as a statutory duty. This situation has implications for the resources provided for child protection and safeguarding in the NHS and the identification of key people within health that have responsibility for safeguarding children at national and local level.

Potential additional relevant health services span (but are not limited to): health visiting, general practice, school nursing, child and adolescent mental health, sexual health, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, dentistry, and child community health. This demonstrates both the potential breadth of the potential Bairns' Hoose health remit and the complexity of representing 'health' at a strategic level through only one or two individuals.

---

<sup>13</sup> Joint paediatric forensic examination or single doctor examination

Partners acknowledge existing gaps in the provision of a comprehensive plan of health support to children following a disclosure of abuse, but recognise Bairns' Hoose offers an opportunity to tackle this.

## **Intended outcomes**

Work on health in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose aims to achieve changes including:

- Children's health and wellbeing needs are assessed where possible, in the familiar setting of the Bairns' Hoose, and where this is not possible, that children experience the spaces and processes as trauma-informed and child-centred.
- Children's health needs and wellbeing needs are met following holistic assessment of need, utilising the broad range of health and wellbeing services available within Aberdeenshire.
- Children's health and wellbeing needs are recognised and understood through timely, comprehensive assessment and support.

## **Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children**

This section outlines five key assumptions about how stakeholders believe changes to health responses in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose pathfinder will help to bring about change for children.

### **Assumption 1 – comprehensive assessment**

When children receive a comprehensive health assessment, this ensures their holistic health needs are identified and responded to at an early stage to improve overall wellbeing and protection. This addresses children's and families' anxiety about health issues arising from abuse or maltreatment and provides an opportunity to intervene in cases where concerns such as neglect may be identified.

### **Assumption 2 – coordination and oversight of health professionals**

If a dedicated Bairns' Hoose health coordinator is in post this will ensure oversight of children's wider physical and mental health needs following abuse (beyond a forensic examination) and support information-sharing across different health systems. This will support a coordinated, comprehensive response to children's health needs, including assessment, particularly in cases where there has been no previous targeted or statutory involvement.

### **Assumption 3 – space supports increased access to healthcare needs and services**

If spaces in the Bairns' Hoose hub and spokes are designed and equipped to meet requirements for health assessments (and potentially some health services), and children have the option to access the health room in Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose, this will increase children's choice about access to health services. This may also reduce the number of different 'service doors' children engage with and support their wellbeing through increased provision of support in a child-centred and familiar space.

### **Assumption 4 – space for forensic medicals**

If targeted improvements are made to the hospital environment and processes for children who require a forensic medical, children will experience less distress when engaging with these processes than prior to the establishment of Bairns' Hoose. If forensic medical examinations can be carried out in the health suite at Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose rather than a hospital environment, this will allow

children to be supported in a more private, calm, non-clinical environment. This will reduce the stress they experience while still allowing professionals to meet evidential requirements for forensic medicals.

### Assumption 5 – widening health engagement

When health professionals from diverse disciplines are brought together within one Bairns' Hoose team (including nursing staff, speech and language therapists, paediatricians, dentists and others), assessment processes become broader and more robust, improving children's access to a range of relevant health interventions in a timely way.

## Progress to date

There is evidence of a number of activities aimed at promoting and improving children's health needs in the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder between February 2024 and September 2025. These include:

- **Embedding health representation on the Bairns' Hoose strategic group.** This has included the lead nurse and lead paediatrician for child protection in NHS Grampian, and the lead nurse for children and families (school nursing and health visiting) in Aberdeenshire.
- **Establishment of a health subgroup** (spanning both Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City) to develop and trial more detailed Bairns' Hoose health engagement with a range of health partners. This has included a focus on referral pathways and coordination.
- **Health-focused learning and information sessions delivered to multidisciplinary professionals** to increase understanding of the different health services and support which might fall under the Bairns' Hoose umbrella.
- **Work to clarify what the health offer can or should look like for children in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose**, taking into account existing challenges around staffing and resources.
- **Securing funding for the appointment of temporary NHS Grampian Bairns' Hoose health posts** (funded by the Scottish Government) operating as 'tests of change' to trial future health offers in both Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose and identify potential impacts. These include:
  - **a 0.5 FTE health coordinator** (fulltime post across the Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Pathfinders), with a remit to explore holistic health needs and how to coordinate these within the Bairns' Hoose model and vision.
  - **a 0.6 FTE paediatrician** (split across the two Pathfinders), with a remit to explore delivery of forensic medicals within Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose, as opposed to a hospital setting.
  - **two part-time speech and language posts** (split across the two Pathfinders), one therapist and one assistant role, supporting the joint investigative interview processes and enhancing referral pathways.
- **Recognition and planning for a role for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) within the Bairns' Hoose** (see section on Recovery for more detail)
- **Redesign work of hospital facilities and processes for children's forensic or comprehensive medical examinations**, based on a trauma and child-centred 'walk through' and audit.

*So, they are thinking about the seating area. They are thinking about screening that off. They are thinking about the fact that police and social work come in our doors, often with lanyards on, or if*

*they are a bobby on the street, they are going to be potentially in a uniform and that's obviously quite identifiable to other families who come in for appointments for other sort of reasons. (Professional 11)*

- **Work to fully furnish and equip a health room in the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Kemnay hub,** with the aim of enabling comprehensive medical examinations to be carried out in the hub so children don't need to attend the hospital. Additionally, refurbishment work on the health suite in Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose is expected to benefit children from Aberdeenshire through the offer of the space for forensic or comprehensive medicals under an agreement to operate 'soft boundaries' between the two local authorities).

## Moving forward and areas for development

The following section highlights a number of challenges or areas for development in relation to the assumptions about responding to children's health needs in Bairns' Hoose.

### Challenge 1: Sustainability of new health roles

Scottish Government funding has supported short-term tests of change, as evidenced in temporary recruitment to paediatric consultant, speech and language therapy, and health coordinator posts. However, there is a recognised need to build in long-term sustainability to these new initiatives and roles given the current challenges in public sector funding. Each Pathfinder will need to consider how new roles and responsibilities can be integrated into existing remits or be able to make a strong business case for additional funding.

### Challenge 2: Ensuring commitment of all health partners and bringing new partners to the table.

The Bairns' Hoose partnerships in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire have taken significant steps forward in engaging with a range of different health services within NHS Grampian. However, a number of relevant health partners have not yet been engaged in Bairns' Hoose discussions – such as dentistry and general practitioners – and this will need to be a priority during the next phase.

### Challenge 3: Equity of health provision and workforce capacity

A key challenge in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose is how equity of health services can be guaranteed across a wide geographical area. Many NHS Grampian services are delivered centrally from the city of Aberdeen. Work is underway in the Pathfinder groups to clarify what services may have the potential to be delivered locally.

*The challenge for health in Aberdeenshire will be the follow-up clinics, and where can we do the sexual health clinic, or like we'd have had the clinics at Turriff. And making sure that they're, you know, we keep that option to have the more managed work done locally, as opposed to the quick time, forensic stuff. (Professional 25)*

Related challenges include difficulties in ensuring equitable services across Aberdeenshire due to staffing and recruitment issues. Examples include school nursing, where only some schools are able to provide sexual health support, or health visitors for pre-school children where staffing shortages affect early intervention work in some areas. Partners have voiced concern about the need to

address these inconsistencies and their implications for equitable health support for children of different ages and locations in Aberdeenshire.

#### Challenge 4: Information-sharing

Partner agencies at local and national levels recognise a challenge in relation to timely information-sharing about children's health among Bairns' Hoose partners. Health colleagues face acute challenges in respect to basic coordination and sharing of information given both the number of different health professionals who may be involved in child protection concern processes and the lack of integration of different information management systems used across health sectors. There are a number of known gaps in the system. For example, current IRD processes would not immediately reveal if a child is receiving a service from CAMHS, or notify a CAMHS practitioner about an upcoming joint investigative interview for a child they are working with.

*CAMHS can be working with a family and we don't get any VPDs [police welfare concerns] so we don't know what is happening, or what might be happening in their life. (Professional 30)*

Similarly, while GPs are recognised to hold information about multiple health partners involved in a child's care, they are not currently engaged in Bairns' Hoose planning.

*If they've been in A&E – as health visitors that information isn't sent directly to us. It is sent to the GP. And they have forwarded it to us as the named person, but the GP is actually the person in receipt of the information first and foremost. So, whether they have been in hospital, whether they have been to A&E, whether it was a missed appointment... generally it is the GP that it would always go back to first and foremost. (Professional 20)*

The lack of a statutory basis for child protection responses in health beyond regular child protection guidance may exacerbate these issues.

## 7. Justice

(Bairns' Hoose Standards 1, 6 and 7)

### Current context

The challenges of current justice systems and processes for children in Scotland following a report or disclosure of abuse are well-documented. The justice journey can be a long one, frequently subject to delays (SCTS, 2015; Houghton et al., 2022; Mitchell et al., 2023; 2024; and 2025). Children and families can struggle to know or understand what is happening to their case. This may be a result of a lack of coordination and communication between justice agencies, or between these agencies and the children and families involved. The use of jargon and complex legal processes may further affect understanding. Justice processes and spaces for child witnesses in Scotland require change, with children's attendance in court spaces and the experience of cross-examination in live trials known to be traumatic (Houghton et al., 2022). Overall, prosecution needs have tended to be prioritised over child-centred practice, leaving children and families feeling lost and their voices missing from justice processes, with this lack of power affecting their recovery.

The Bairns' Hoose partners recognise that most children's justice journeys do not end in a court trial and that justice journeys should be understood more broadly as involving one or more of four key agencies: the **police**; the **courts**; the **prosecution service**; and the **Children's Hearings System**.

Findings from a survey of multidisciplinary professionals across Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire prior to Bairns' Hoose implementation highlighted local challenges in relation to ensuring a child-centred and trauma-informed vision of justice for children, mirroring national concerns. These include delays in accessing justice, the distressing nature of justice processes, and the need for a more child-friendly court system (Duncan et al., 2025).

A number of initiatives are driving change forward. Implementation of the Scottish Child Interview Model locally has been acknowledged to support significant improvements in how evidence is gathered from children and has provided a useful foundation for other justice work. Nationally, a number of other changes are expected to help improve children's experiences of the justice system. By April 2026 it is anticipated that there will be statutory presumption in favour of a child's evidence being pre-recorded ahead of a trial, for certain categories of offences in sheriff and jury, and high court proceedings.<sup>14</sup> This presumption has been in existence for all under 18s in High Court proceedings since January 2020. Changes to summary case management will also be rolled out nationally by the end of 2025. This will involve: a focus on early exchange of evidence and information between police and the prosecution service; early disclosure and meaningful engagement between parties; proactive judicial case management at the early stages of the court process and consideration of whether a trial date needs to be fixed or not, thus minimising the number of child witnesses who are cited unnecessarily. The introduction of compulsory use of body-worn video cameras by police at live incidents is expected to add to evidence-gathering, and developments in Scots law with respect to hearsay evidence and corroboration are expected to further reduce the need for children to be cited as witnesses (Barclay, 2025).

---

<sup>14</sup> Summary proceedings are heard by a sheriff only, solemn proceedings involve a sheriff and jury.

## Intended outcomes

Work on justice in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose aims to achieve changes including:

- Children are supported to share 'best quality' evidence through a trauma-informed, evidence-based joint investigative interview (using the Scottish Child Interview Model).
- Reduced requirement for children to attend live trials in court buildings through the use of remote links and recording of evidence pre-trial and/or improved evidence leading to more early guilty pleas.
- Increased dialogue between key justice partners helping to improve interagency processes and provide faster, more seamless justice experience for children.
- Children involved in criminal trials feel supported and well-informed, and their needs are championed through specialist advocacy support.
- Children's needs are seen and met through coordination of justice professionals with health, recovery and social work professionals.
- Scrutiny of IRD decision-making to ensure proportionate use of joint investigative interviews for children.

## Core assumptions – how our plans will create change for children

This section outlines five key assumptions about how stakeholders believe changes to health responses in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose pathfinder will help to bring about change for children.

### Assumption 1 - space contributes to improved quality of evidence

If Bairns' Hoose increases the number of optimised investigative interviews being undertaken using the SCIM model in a purpose-built, child-friendly interview suite this will increase the quality of evidence available to all justice partners. This has the potential to reduce the number of interviews being required (unless in the child's interests) while improving the quality of evidence to inform prosecutions and/or good decision-making in the Children's Hearings System.

### Assumption 2 – improved multidisciplinary working between justice agencies

If police, the prosecution service and the Children's Reporter are working closely, having early discussion of cases and problem-solving together, then information-sharing between agencies will improve and case progression will be streamlined. Professionals will also be more able to identify (and address) possible gaps in the system which have a detrimental impact on children and their families. This will help reduce delays and improve quality of information about cases available to children, families and practitioners, improving children's experiences.

### Assumption 3 – widening knowledge of the justice system

If all multidisciplinary professionals have a better understanding of justice processes, they are better positioned to support children and families to understand these processes, manage expectations and minimise their anxiety. This will avoid children and families receiving limited or conflicting information about justice processes, supporting them to feel more in control and aiding their recovery.

#### Assumption 4 – improved, coordinated communication with children and families

If justice professionals communicate clearly and regularly with children and families, using developmentally appropriate language and materials, supported by a professional known to the child, this helps children and families better understand systems and processes. This then helps manage their expectations, reduce their anxiety and support them to feel more in control.

*We'll know we're doing it better, when... [the COPFS] team, or [SCRA], have to say, 'right this is going to be six months to a year', and they [the family] go, 'no it's fine, I understand that, because you know, [the Bairns' Hoose coordinator] explained that to me'. I think, then, we will truly know that we're doing it better. (Professional 25)*

#### Assumption 5 – reducing distress of giving evidence

If the use of pre-recorded witness evidence (Evidence by Commissioner) is increased, this will create a more child-centred and trauma-informed approach **to children being questioned**, reducing the distress for children associated with this experience.

#### Assumption 6 – reduce impact of giving evidence 'live'

If children are required to testify in a criminal court hearing, opportunities to do so via a 'live link' room in a Bairns' Hoose will increase their safety, comfort and ability to provide their best evidence. This will be achieved using a child-centred and familiar space and avoiding the negative experiences associated with attending court buildings, such as fear of contact with the alleged perpetrator and long waits in busy and formal spaces.



Interview room in Kemnay Bairns' Hoose

## Progress to date

There is evidence of a number of activities aimed at promoting and improving responses to child victims and witnesses in the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder between February 2024 and September 2025. These include:

- **Establishment of a joint Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose justice sub-group with representation from all partners.** The group is focused on raising awareness and understanding of justice processes, improving interagency justice processes and quality assurance, delivering multidisciplinary training and reporting to the main strategic group. This has included awareness-raising of SCIM processes with COPFS and SCRA, including plan for child's needs, to help maintain continuity of support to child through justice processes.
- **Senior representatives from police, prosecution service, courts and the Children's Hearings System have consistently made themselves available for scrutiny and conversation** with the wider strategic group, fostering strong working relationships and strengthening awareness of each agency's remit.
- **Identification of joint partnership action plan to address short, medium and long-term justice goals** around communication, streamlining of processes, building greater understanding of each other's roles and agencies, and increasing collaborative working across all aspects of the justice process from interagency referral discussion onwards.
- **Establishment of quarterly quality assurance meetings between police, prosecution service and Children's Hearings System** to review the evidential quality of joint investigative interviews and ensure best practice is occurring.
- **Collaboration between the Victim Information and Advice service (VIA),** which sits within the prosecution service, **and Children First's Advocacy Rights and Recovery service** to look at how best to coordinate and improve support for child victims and witnesses, and establish an information-sharing protocol between these two agencies.
- **Delivery of presentations, workshops and webinars to enhance knowledge and understanding** of court, prosecution and Children's Hearings System processes across all relevant sectors working with children.

*We want to do a webinar for the north-east that essentially has COPFS, SCRA, and the courts... When you were speaking earlier about, you know, indictments, and the challenges? And I think, if we can get practitioners to know that - it leads back into - if they're the ones that are speaking to the families, and that management of expectations - if we can get the boots on the ground to understand, truly, why the delay has happened, then they relay that to the families, so when the delay happens it's not as negatively impacted. So, I think that would be a big bit that we do justice wise. (Professional 25)*

- **Progressing of discussions at a local and national level regarding data-sharing agreements** to effectively monitor the impact and progress of Bairns' Hoose relative to the Scottish justice system.
- **Enhanced reporting of information in Standard Prosecution Reports (SPRs),** the document used by police to report a crime to the prosecution service, to support better understanding of child's individual needs and circumstances, and promote more timely decision-making.

- **Collaborative discussions between the prosecution service (COPFS) and the courts (SCTS) around installation of court live link systems across the partnership’s sites and the development of a protocol for their use.**
- **Reliance on schools for investigative interviews has reduced** following a test of change undertaken to invite more children to interviews off school grounds in the Bairns’ Hoose. This has involved seeking parental consent in more cases where the parent or carer themselves may have been accused of causing physical harm (familial assault) and the IRD has assessed the risk and concluded the child is safe to remain in the care of parent/carers. Previously, there may have been a concern that seeking consent in advance might negatively affect the child’s capacity to undertake an interview.

## Moving forward and areas for development

The following section highlights a number of challenges or areas for development in relation to the assumptions about delivering justice for children in the Bairns’ Hoose.

### Challenge 1: Coordination of communication and continuity of support for a child and family

Effective, seamless coordination of court support and communication across a range of justice individuals and agencies is a well-recognised challenge – with families historically struggling to get information about the progression of their case, particularly after cases have been passed from police to the prosecution service (COPFS). There is a need to clarify how Bairns’ Hoose multi-agency working will address these challenges, particularly in the context of long waits for children and families before conclusion of court proceedings.

*I think that’s the biggest challenge that we have, justice wise, it isn’t the end game of the court room, because we’ll get there, and it isn’t the legislative things that are on the horizon, or doing things slightly better. I think the biggest challenge that we have is mapping out, in true Bairns’ Hoose fashion, about just having that familiarity for a family. How do we manage, so [the police] has charged someone with this offence, which is the beginning, how do we manage a continuity of who the best person [to provide support]? (Professional 2)*

*At the moment, I think it is really inconsistent, and particularly for a family when they’re finding out, this [case] is no longer progressing... We did have a situation, the police going out on a Saturday afternoon, you know, saying to a family, and their weekend was ruined, they had no support around them. (Professional 15).*

The Bairns’ Hoose Coordinator is seen to have ‘a pivotal role in all of this, as the *gatekeeper of all communications*’ (Professional 31) although the feasibility of this responsibility resting with one role remains to be seen (see section on multidisciplinary working). Relatedly the concept of a single point of contact for a family requires further consideration about their role in coordinating communication about justice processes – particularly if their role is based outside the immediate Bairns’ Hoose team where they are likely to have less justice process expertise.

### Challenge 2: Gaining greater understanding of what justice means to children

There is a shared assumption among partners that within Bairns’ Hoose, justice must be understood much more broadly than court processes, which are likely to affect a minority of children. At the

same time, there is a recognised gap in understanding how different children themselves conceptualise justice – and what this could mean for delivering child-centred justice in Bairns’ Hoose. Deepening understanding of what justice means for children (and their families) is likely to help professionals and systems respond to their needs in a more informed manner. This concern expands the concept of justice beyond formal justice processes and recognises that holding a clearer understanding of what children feel to be important at certain points within the justice process will aid more child-centred responses.

### Challenge 3: Clarifying the role of Bairns’ Hoose in the Children’s Hearings System

For many children who make a disclosure of abuse and undertake an investigative interview, there may be no further action taken from a prosecutorial perspective but still a need for statutory intervention to safeguard their welfare. In such cases, children will be referred to the Children’s Hearings System and information from the joint investigative interview (JII) may be used as part of the evidence presented in related court proceedings. The Children’s Hearings System is dependent on both the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration (SCRA) and Children’s Hearings Scotland (CHS) to operate. In the absence of national guidance from the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration, work has been taking place locally (through the justice sub-group) to look at how current processes can be improved to make the best use of joint investigative interviews and reduce the need for children to provide a repeat account of any of their experiences. However, it is recognised that further work is required both to understand children’s experiences of hearings and consider how these experiences can be integrated within the wider Bairns’ Hoose context. This is likely to require both local attention and stronger links with the Children’s Hearings Working Group. Children’s Hearings Scotland, responsible for the recruitment and training of panel members, remain notably absent from strategic planning in the Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Pathfinders.

### Challenge 4: Preventing children and families from being unnecessarily drawn into justice processes

As part of Bairns’ Hoose implementation there is an opportunity to review and consider nationally, processes and decision-making which first bring children into contact with child protection and justice services and to what degree this will always be in children and families’ best interests. For example, this recognises the risks that involvement in the justice system may bring – either through exacerbating trauma for children or potentially detrimental impacts on family functioning.

*I suppose, the only other thing, nationally, for myself, would be is that, just having that national [conversation] of, what is actually child protection, and justice for a family? In the police, we are as bad as anyone about being black and white, and are governed by legislation. The reality of child protection is, children saying that they’ve been hit at home — it’s not in our gift in the police not to deal with a child that says they’ve been assaulted. But sometimes, you look at that, and you go, well are we actually making this worse, by our involvement?... I can sit and say, ‘the likelihood of that going to court is minimal’ — that doesn’t help that family who have that hanging over them. (Professional 25)*

### Challenge 5: Extending justice partners’ involvement in Bairns’ Hoose

While the Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Partnerships are to be commended for the active engagement of key justice partners in Bairns’ Hoose implementation, there remain some gaps. Although some local awareness-raising activities about Bairns’ Hoose have taken place, understanding of solicitors’ perspectives on key elements such as the Scottish Child Interview Model,

or use of Evidence by Commissioner, remains limited. While the prosecution service and the Children's Hearings System have policies which prioritise citing children to attend court only when absolutely necessary, the approach of defence solicitors remains less understood. Other evidence also suggests there is mixed levels of awareness of the Scottish Child Interview Model among sheriffs (Holland et al., 2025). Given that SCIM has become central to the Bairns' Hoose model, sheriffs' general knowledge of the Bairns' Hoose model will also be important. This is particularly critical in light of sheriffs' role in holding oversight and control of the questions posed to children in cases where pre-recorded evidence is going to be gathered.

#### **Challenge 6: Timescales for justice processes**

Protracted timescales for justice processes remain a significant concern. It is cited as a major source of difficulty for children and families in previous research and local consultations, and while there are limits on the degree to which local partners can effect change on this issue, its significance must be recognised and remain a focus in systems change efforts. This is particularly important if aspirations to create child-centred justice are to be met. In the meantime, opportunities to mitigate the harms of protracted justice processes remain important, such as through increased use of Evidence by Commissioner; advocacy and support; improved information-sharing with children and families.

## Conclusion

The early implementation of Aberdeenshire's Bairns' Hoose represents a remarkable example of the scale of change achieved through vision, genuine collaboration, and a shared commitment to improving children's experiences and outcomes. There is much to applaud in the work that has taken place so far. Partners across a wide range of sectors – including health, social work, police, justice, education, and the third sector – have come together with a strong sense of purpose, an absence of professional defensiveness, and readiness and commitment to implement multiple tests of change. They have demonstrated what is possible when agencies unite around a common goal.

The creation and implementation of a unique 'hub-and-spoke' approach for Bairns' Hoose in Aberdeenshire reflects both an understanding of the local geography, service landscape and the needs of children and families in rural communities, and creativity to design a model within this context. The opening of the main 'hub', (Kemnay) in August 2025 following completion of Phase 1 renovations, alongside refurbishment of 'spoke' spaces, has created significant changes to the environments in which children and their families in Aberdeenshire receive support after abuse or maltreatment. The hub and spokes support flexibility and reach, while retaining core Bairns' Hoose principles. This represents a significant achievement that speaks to the creativity and determination of all involved.

One of the most striking aspects of Aberdeenshire's Bairns' Hoose implementation is the pace at which change has occurred. Rather than waiting for perfect conditions, the partnership has had the creativity and confidence to move forward with active tests of change – trying, learning, and adapting in real time. This attitude, striving for continuous improvement, is not only commendable but essential in a programme as complex and ambitious as Bairns' Hoose. It is evident that partners are willing to challenge each other, and traditional ways of working, through both established and newly-developed relationships to help break down siloed working and be more child-centred in their practice.

However, the journey is not without its challenges. The national context presents both opportunity and complexity. This context includes the ambitious agenda for transformational systems change through the phased rollout of Bairns' Hoose and the requirement to apply the National Standards, as well as the need to report on learning on Bairns' Hoose implementation across Scotland while managing Pathfinder funding. At the same time, financial pressures are being felt across all sectors, and these pressures inevitably affect the capacity to sustain and scale what has been started through Pathfinder funding, raising concerns about the equity of services provided to all children. Ensuring the long-term sustainability of the Bairns' Hoose approach in Aberdeenshire will require continued advocacy, strategic alignment, and investment at both local and national levels. Solutions to the knotty challenge of data collection, alongside information-sharing within and between different agencies, will need to be addressed to help understand and evidence the changes created through Bairns' Hoose. Finally, addressing how to securely embed and integrate the Bairns' Hoose approach within the wider workforce and ensure the central Bairns' Hoose multidisciplinary team has a strong identity, including clarity of individual roles and joint purpose, will be essential as Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose continues to operate more fully.

Despite these challenges, it is clear that strong foundations have been laid. The learning emerging from Aberdeenshire's experience is rich and valuable, offering insights not only for local refinement but also for other areas looking to develop similar approaches. The commitment to working collaboratively, testing new ideas, and placing the needs of children at the centre of decision-making is something to be celebrated.

## References

- Barclay, G.** (2025) 'Hearsay under distress? De Recenti statements after the Lord Advocate's References', *Edinburgh Law Review*, 29 (2) pp. 306–312.
- Barnahus Network** (2021) *Forensic medical interventions in Barnahus across Europe*. Available at: <https://www.barnahus.eu/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Medical-Examination-and-Treatment-in-Barnahus-2021-FINAL.pdf> (Accessed: 20 September 2025).
- Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989) Treaty no. 27531. United Nations Treat Series, 1577, pp. 3-178. Available at: [https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch\\_IV\\_11p.pdf](https://treaties.un.org/doc/Treaties/1990/09/19900902%2003-14%20AM/Ch_IV_11p.pdf) (Accessed: 8 April 2025).
- Duncan, C., Mitchell, M., Wretman, C. and Warrington, C.** (2025) *Preparing for Bairns' Hoose in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire: Professionals Survey on Current Systems and Readiness for Change*. Child Safety, Justice and Recovery Group, University of Edinburgh. Available at: <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/2025%20PreparingforBairnsHoosainAberdeenanandAberdeenshire.pdf> (Accessed: 25 August 2025).
- Galloway, S., Love, R. & Wales, A.** (2017) *The Right to Recover: therapeutic services for children and young people following sexual abuse: an overview of provision in the West of Scotland*. London: NSPCC.
- Harewood, E** (2025) *Barnahus Ireland Therapeutic Mapping*. Strasburg. Council of Europe. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/mapping-study-of-therapeutic-services/1680b5d2c0>
- Healthcare Improvement Scotland** (2023) *Bairns' Hoose Standards*. Available at: <https://www.healthcareimprovementscotland.scot/publications/bairns-hoose-standards/> (Accessed: 18 September 2025).
- Herbert, J. L., & Bromfield, L.** (2019). 'Multi-disciplinary teams responding to child abuse: Common features and assumptions.' *Children and Youth Services Review*, 106, p.104467.
- Holland, L., Adelaine, A. and Hastings, E.** (2025) *The Scottish Child Interview Model for Joint Investigative Interviewing: an evaluation*. Glasgow: The Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ). Available at: [https://www.cosla.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0015/61251/SCIM-Evaluation-Report-2025.pdf](https://www.cosla.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0015/61251/SCIM-Evaluation-Report-2025.pdf) (Accessed: 18 September 2025).
- Houghton, C. and MacDonald, R.** (2018) *Everyday Heroes: Justice Report*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh. Available at: <https://everydayheroes.sps.ed.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/everyday-heroes-briefing2-Justice.pdf> (Accessed: 09 October 2025).
- Houghton, C. Morrison, F. Warrington, C. and Tisdall, K.** (2022) *Domestic abuse court experiences - perspectives of victims and witnesses: research findings*. Edinburgh: Justice and Analytical Services - Scottish Government [Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/domestic-abuse-court-experiences-research-perspectives-victims-witnesses-scotland/documents/> (Accessed 09 October 2025).
- Independent Care Review** (2021) *The Promise*. Available at: <https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Promise.pdf> (Accessed: 01 October 2025).
- Johansson, S., Stefansen, K., Bakketeig, E. & Kaldal, A.** (2017) Implementing the Nordic Barnahus Model: Characteristics and Local Adaptions. In: *Collaborating against child abuse: Exploring the Nordic model*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Johansson, S., Stefansen, K., Bakketeig, E. and Kaldal, A.** (2024) *Justice and recovery for victimised children: institutional tensions in Nordic and European Barnahus models*. Cham: Springer Nature.
- Lamb, E.** (forthcoming). *Creating Spaces for Children and Young People to be Seen and Heard: The Use of Space in the North Strathclyde Bairns Hoose*. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Edinburgh.

**Mitchell, M., Warrington, C., Devaney, J., Lavoie J. and Yates, P.** (2023) *North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose Evaluation: Phase One Report*. Child Safety, Justice and Recovery Group, University of Edinburgh. Available at:  
<https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/North%20Strathclyde%20Bairns%20Hoose%20Evaluation%20-%20Phase%20One%20Report.pdf>

**Mitchell, M., Warrington, C., Devaney, J., Lavoie, J. Lamb, E., Hill, L., Wretman, C. and Duncan, C** (2024) *The Journey so far: North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose - Phase Two Evaluation Report*. Child Safety, Justice and Recovery Group, University of Edinburgh. Available at:  
<https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/north-strathclyde-bairns-hoose-evaluation-phase-two-report.pdf>

**Mitchell, M., McMellon, C. and Warrington, C.** (2025) *Joining the Dots: Sycamore Bairns' Hoose Evaluation*. Child Safety, Justice and Recovery Group, University of Edinburgh. Available at:  
[https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/SBH\\_Evaluation\\_Phase1Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/pdf/SBH_Evaluation_Phase1Report_Final.pdf)

**Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service** (2015) *Evidence and Procedure Review*. Edinburgh: SCTS. Available at: <https://www.scotcourts.gov.uk/media/vtsorv2o/evidence-and-procedure-full-report-publication-version-pdf.pdf>

**Scottish Government** (2011) *Land Area (based on 2011 Data Zones): a data cube spreadsheet*. Available at:  
<https://statistics.gov.scot/slice?dataset=http%3A%2F%2Fstatistics.gov.scot%2Fdata%2Fland-area-2011-data-zone-based&http%3A%2F%2Fpurl.org%2Flinked-data%2Fcube%23measureType=http%3A%2F%2Fstatistics.gov.scot%2Fdef%2Fmeasure-properties%2Fcount> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

**Scottish Government** (2023) *National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 – updated 2023*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-guidance-child-protection-scotland-2021-updated-2023/> (Accessed: 26 September 2025).

**Scottish Government** (2025) *Council Area: Aberdeenshire*. Available at:  
<https://statistics.gov.scot/atlas/resource?uri=http%3A%2F%2Fstatistics.gov.scot%2Fid%2Fstatistical-geography%2FS12000034> (Accessed: 20 October 2025).

**Stefansen K., Bakketeig E. and Johansson, S.** (2024) 'Institutional Tensions to Medical Examinations in Barnahus'. In **Johansson, S., Stefansen, K., Bakketeig, E. and Kaldal, A.** (eds) *Justice and recovery for victimised children: institutional tensions in Nordic and European Barnahus models*. Cham: Springer Nature, pp. 87-112.

# Appendix 1: Critical questions for reflection

## Implementing transformational systems change

### Challenge 1: Operating without clarity about available future funding

- i. How will the Aberdeenshire Partnership assess and understand the longer-term Bairns' Hoose budgetary implications for each of the partners going forward?
- ii. How are the risks related to sustainability being identified, assessed and progressed for action within the Partnership?
- iii. How will contingency plans in relation to sustainability be developed by the Partnership?

### Challenge 2: Creating equitable service responses

- i. What are the concerns and consequences of the inequality of resources between Bairns' Hoose and other services in Aberdeenshire at a time of significant financial pressure on public services?
- ii. What is the role of the strategic group to help address these issues?

### Challenge 3: Connecting strategic and frontline learning and change

- i. What is the communications strategy for enabling the wider workforce to know and understand the Bairns' Hoose model and principles, and how their views also contribute to change?
- ii. What is the wider workforce training plan to ensure all staff across Aberdeenshire in contact with children engaged in Bairns' Hoose understand implications for their role?

### Challenge 4: Integrated data collection

- i. What indicators will help to evidence the key impacts of Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose, and how ready is the Partnership to collect and analyse this data – in relation to both
  - improved practice and systems, and
  - improved children's outcomes?
- ii. What supports and resources (staff skills, IT requirements, etc) are required (locally and nationally) to collect and analyse data to evidence Bairns' Hoose impact and improve strategic decision-making?
- iii. In the absence of finalised national Bairns' Hoose indicators, how should local partners continue to develop plans for local data collection?

### Challenge 5: Managing the pace of change

- i. How can the members of the strategic group recognise the different pressures affecting individuals while keeping focused on implementing change with pace?
- ii. How are current activities prioritised and assessed for relevance by the strategic group?

### Challenge 6: Engaging those authorised to make changes

- i. Do people involved in the strategic group have the authority to make decisions for the agency they represent?

- ii. How does the partnership support members to engage with those outside the strategic group who have the authority to make decisions about implementing change?
- iii. Who is not involved in the strategic group who should be?

#### Challenge 7: Linking national and local systems change

- i. How do Aberdeenshire strategic group members keep up to date with national agendas for change (policy, reviews, legislation, etc) relevant to Bairns' Hoose implementation?
- ii. How does the Aberdeenshire strategic group feed local learning into national conversations?

#### Challenge 8: Inconsistencies across adjacent Bairns' Hoose Pathfinders, when operating 'soft boundaries'

- i. What are the implications of the commitment across Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City to operating 'soft boundaries', particularly in relation to consistency of approach and deciding where their Bairns' Hoose plans should move forward independently or together?

### Multidisciplinary working

#### Challenge 1: Information-sharing within and between agencies

- ii. What and where are the barriers to sharing information across Bairns' Hoose partners that need addressing to enhance timely, multi-agency responses to individual children?
- iii. How can existing data be used and shared to support a clearer understanding of children's health, justice and welfare needs within the Bairns' Hoose?

#### Challenge 2: Multidisciplinary approach to assessment and case discussions

- i. Who are the Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose core multidisciplinary team? What are their roles, responsibilities and remits?
- ii. How will staff working jointly to respond to children assess their needs, safety, access to justice, recovery and advocacy needs?
- iii. How will information relating to cases be collected, shared and monitored by the Bairns' Hoose multidisciplinary professionals working with the child and family members?

#### Challenge 3: Establishing the role of the Bairns' Hoose Coordinator

- i. Are the expectations of the Bairns' Hoose' Coordinator role – to manage oversight of cases alongside the management of the Kemnay hub and recovery (ARR) team –manageable and realistic?
- ii. How will review and development of the Coordinator role happen – ensuring it is responsive to learning about the scope and nature of children's needs?

#### Challenge 4: Integration of Bairns' Hoose with existing systems

- i. How will the strategic group support integration of the Bairns' Hoose approach and processes within current multidisciplinary working across the whole of the child's justice and recovery journey? How will any required changes be managed to streamline and improve processes?
- ii. What tests of change would help embed Bairns' Hoose in court, education, and multidisciplinary systems beyond SCIM and IRD processes?

- iii. What might be some ways of measuring effective multidisciplinary working?

#### Challenge 5: Building a secure and confident workforce

- i. What does the Aberdeenshire Partnership need to do to focus on building a positive multidisciplinary Bairns' Hoose culture?
- ii. What are the multidisciplinary training needs for the Bairns' Hoose team and the wider workforce in relation to the Bairns' Hoose approach?
- iii. How will staff be supervised and supported across their work responding to children and families within the Bairns' Hoose approach?

#### Challenge 6: Supporting multidisciplinary working without the benefits of co-location

- i. How will the Aberdeenshire Partnership create an 'under one roof' feeling in relation to ensuring multidisciplinary working without the benefits of comprehensive colocation of staff?

### Voice

#### Challenge 1: Ensuring children have information about every step of their journey and are clear about their choices

- ii. Where are additional resources required to provide children and families with accessible information about what to expect at every potential step of their Bairns' Hoose journey and the choices available to them?
- iii. How will this information be adapted for different age groups and children and families with additional communication or learning needs?
- iv. What ongoing strategies will be required to support the wider workforce to be able to share accurate information with children and families about what to expect from a Bairns' Hoose journey?

#### Challenge 2: Ensuring feedback processes are consistently embedded across a multidisciplinary system (see multidisciplinary working section)

- i. How will feedback from children and families be collected and responded to in a more systematic manner – ensuring consistency across a wide range of services?
- ii. How will more systematic processes be put in place for responding to feedback?

#### Challenge 3 – Ensuring strategic decisions and service design are genuinely informed by children's experiences – translating voice into action

- i. What strategies would ensure a more direct link between feedback on children and families' experiences and strategic decision-making about Bairns' Hoose design and implementation? (for example, how are links made between the testimonies presented at the start of Aberdeenshire Strategic group meetings and decisions or planning that then take place?).

#### Challenge 4: Ensuring all children feel equally listened to in relation to their individual care and justice experiences

- ii. How will skills and capacity across different services be built to support all children to share their views and feed this into all stages of multidisciplinary Bairns' Hoose decision-making?

- iii. How can we ensure that children’s perspectives (and choices) – particularly in cases of younger children and those with additional communication needs – are not solely mediated through parents or carers, and how will situations be managed if the views of children and their families differ?

#### Challenge 5: Enabling safe and representative consultation with children and families

- i. How can consultative and co-production efforts with children and families capture diverse experiences while also recognising that opportunities to participate in co-production or consultation will not feel possible or of interest to all?
- ii. How can in-depth collective consultation and participation groups (such as Changemakers) be sustained and coordinated with a range of other feedback and consultation mechanisms which draw in wider cohorts of children?
- iii. How might group work with the Changemakers be supported across a wide geographical area?

#### Challenge 6: Setting ambitious and realistic targets for children’s influence and participation

- i. What mechanisms can support partners to widen the scope of service design and types of decision-making that children can meaningfully influence?
- ii. How will professionals create transparency and manage realistic expectations about decisions that will be taken in situations in which children’s choice is limited?

## Space

#### Challenge 1: Ensuring equity of service across different types of spaces

- i. How will support for children and families at the point of an investigative interview be delivered equitably across hub-and-spoke sites (for example meeting parents’ needs for privacy and support in a spoke site where there is limited private space for them to wait during an interview)?
- ii. How can quality assurance of investigative interviews at different types of sites (e.g. those with fixed recording equipment and those using mobile recording equipment) be carried out to ensure quality of evidence is not affected by the choice of interview site?
- iii. How will different types of health assessment, such as sexual health needs, be met equitably across hub-and-spoke sites?

#### Challenge 2: Managing resource implications of working across a large geographical area

- i. How will the additional impact of travel time for staff and children be built in to operationalising the Aberdeenshire Bairns’ Hoose across the hub and spokes?
- ii. How can Bairns’ Hoose staff resources best be managed to reduce the impact of geography (and associated travel time) on delivery of services?

#### Challenge 3: Ensuring long-term sustainability of the Bairns’ Hoose hub in Kemnay

- i. How will a fair model of funding operating and staffing costs for the Kemnay hub be developed to ensure contributions from all members of the Partnership (not just Aberdeenshire Council)?

#### Challenge 4: Collecting data about how the Bairns' Hoose spaces are used and experienced

- ii. How will current data collection support understanding of how children's needs are geographically distributed and met across the different Bairns' Hoose spaces?
- iii. What other data capture is required to improve services and understanding and use of the hub-and-spoke spaces, e.g. recording decision-making in relation to choice of where to conduct an investigative interview (e.g. school, Kemnay hub or Turriff spoke)?

### Recovery

#### Challenge 1: Delivering equitable recovery services across a large rural locality

- i. How can Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose ensure an equitable, consistent process for allocating recovery support (*linked to questions about assessment below*) and also avoid duplication of input and role?
- ii. How will the needs of those identified as having more severe mental health difficulties be met?

#### Challenge 2: Enabling collaboration across statutory and third sector partners

- i. What role will CAMHS play in Bairns' Hoose – recognising both their resource constraints and valuable expertise?
- ii. What systems are in place to coordinate provision and information-sharing of recovery support provided through diverse services (including universal services such as school)?
- iii. How will Bairns' Hoose keep track of (and respond to) children's experiences and changing needs over time, particularly for those engaged with Bairns' Hoose over the longer term due to engagement in lengthy justice processes?

#### Challenge 3: Assessing children's needs

- i. Who will be responsible for assessing children's psychosocial needs and sharing that information with those coordinating services?
- ii. When and how will an assessment of children's psychosocial needs take place in Aberdeenshire Bairns' Hoose (and which assessment tools or processes will be used)?
- iii. How will professionals ensure children whose needs are less visible (for example, through internalising their responses to trauma) still have their needs identified and responded to?

#### Challenge 4: Managing limited advocacy, rights and recovery (ARR) resources alongside a commitment to a flexible and responsive offer

- i. How can resources best be managed to balance the logistical challenges associated with Aberdeenshire's geography alongside a commitment to children having a single point of contact and ongoing relational support?
- ii. How will service design shift if current resources don't meet the emerging need? Are there plans for triaging allocation of support and if so, how will this be linked to assessment?
- iii. What role will the support offered to parents and families play in meeting children's needs?

## Challenge 5: Mapping services and understanding the role of different types of recovery support

- i. How can Bairns' Hoose professionals develop a shared understanding (and language) of the meaning of recovery provision and needs for children who have experienced abuse and violence, to help inform development of services?
- ii. How will current recovery provision across Aberdeenshire be mapped, supporting effective coordination between specialist Bairns' Hoose recovery provision and wider services?

## Health

### Challenge 1: Sustainability of new health roles

- i. How will the impact of new temporary health posts be captured, and used to support any requests for future funding to sustain these roles?
- ii. How will coordination and oversight of health needs continue after Scottish Government funding for the temporary health coordinator post ends?

### Challenge 2: Ensuring commitment of all health partners and bringing new partners to the table

- i. Are there health services in NHS Grampian which are not currently engaged with Bairns' Hoose that would benefit from being involved (e.g. general practitioner or dental colleagues)?
- ii. How can these services be invited to get effectively engaged in the Bairns' Hoose approach?

### Challenge 3: Equity of health provision and workforce capacity

- i. How will health needs for different children be met in the difficult context of cost of resources and staffing challenges (shortages, inexperienced staff, workloads, etc)?
- ii. What work is being done to support other health services (e.g. health visiting, school nursing, speech and language therapy, child and adolescent mental health services) to adapt to the needs of Bairns' Hoose? In particular, how will responsibility for service provision be decided that is different to existing pathways (if required)?
- iii. How can the gaps in Bairns' Hoose-related health services be identified and this information used to inform strategic planning for health services locally and nationally?

### Challenge 4: Information-sharing

- i. What and where are the gaps in current health data collection across NHS Grampian that would be helpful to support the work of the multi-agency team in the Bairns' Hoose?
- ii. How could existing data be used to support a clear understanding of children's health and needs within the Bairns' Hoose, both operationally and strategically?
- iii. What supports and resources (staff skills, IT requirements, etc.) are required locally and nationally to collect and analyse health data to support the work of the Bairns' Hoose?

## Justice

### Challenge 1: Coordination of communication and continuity of support for a child and family

- i. How will coordination and communication of justice processes with children and families be overseen? Will this be a single Bairns' Hoose Coordinator or does this require a coordination team?
- ii. How will the child's Single Point of Contact know which justice agency to contact?

### Challenge 2: Gaining greater understanding of what justice means to children

- i. How do children conceptualise justice?
- ii. How might this information be gathered, and used to consider existing processes and priorities amongst justice partners?

### Challenge 3: Clarifying the role of Bairns' Hoose in the Children's Hearings System

- i. What consideration is being given to children's experiences of justice within a children's hearing?
- ii. Does Children's Hearings Scotland need to be at the table to consider what training and support may be required for panel members? For example, how might panel members need to consider the effect on a child of being asked to retell their story in a hearing?
- iii. How is the Bairns' Hoose model being considered within wider plans to redesign the Children's Hearings System?

### Challenge 4: Preventing children and families from being unnecessarily drawn into justice processes

- i. Are there opportunities at a national level to limit or reduce children's and families' contact with child protection and legal processes where this is not in a child's or family's best interests?

### Challenge 5: Extending justice partners' involvement in Bairns' Hoose

- ii. Should defence solicitors and sheriffs be brought into discussions regarding Bairns' Hoose development – and if so, how should this be undertaken?
- iii. What knowledge and understanding of Bairns' Hoose principles and processes may still be required for members of the judiciary beyond existing communication mechanisms via the courts?

### Challenge 6: Timescales for justice processes

- i. What opportunities (if any) are there locally to reduce the timescales for criminal justice or children's hearing processes where children are witnesses?
- ii. Where children are engaged in lengthy criminal justice or children's hearing processes, how can additional support and/or justice tools be leveraged through the Bairns' Hoose model to mitigate distress associated with lengthy and uncertain processes (e.g. Evidence by Commissioner; Bairns' Hoose-based live link rooms; specialist court advocacy and support)?

## Appendix 2: Bairns' Hoose Standards

1. My rights are upheld and these Standards are for me. My best interests are always acted on, I am listened to and my views are taken seriously.
2. Everyone who is professionally responsible for protecting children across Scotland works together to ensure Bairns' Hoose helps me and other children.
3. Bairns' Hoose includes me and my family.
4. The Bairns' Hoose feels cosy, comfortable, relaxed and well-kept.
5. The people who help me work well as a team to make sure I have the right support when I need it and things are explained to me in a way that I can understand.
6. I will be supported during any interview. My interview will be recorded and used so I don't have to repeat myself as much.
7. If I need to give evidence in a court or legal process, someone explains what is happening and I am supported through this. There is an option to live link to court from the Bairns' Hoose.
8. My physical, emotional and mental health is looked after. Someone helps to plan appointments and I'm supported.
9. If me or my family need help we can speak with someone who understands what we are going through. I get the help and support I need to recover.
10. The people who help me at the Bairns' Hoose work as a team. They get the help they need to do their jobs well.
11. People at the Bairns' Hoose listen to what I have to say about my experience. What I tell them helps to make the Bairns' Hoose better for other children.

*(Healthcare Improvement Scotland, 2023)*

