

# Joining the Dots

## SYCAMORE BAIRNS' HOOSE EVALUATION

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## Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the first phase of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose multi-agency approach, currently being rolled out by the Scottish Government to improve coordination and responses to children and young people affected by abuse. Bairns' Hoose is based upon the European Barnahus model and is grounded in international evidence and experience. The implementation of Bairns' Hoose across Scotland is recognised as a catalyst for transformational change to improve children's experiences and outcomes after identification of abuse or maltreatment.

The evaluation team acknowledge that the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose partnership is at an early stage of development towards realising the Bairns' Hoose model and the partnership commitment to meet the Scottish Bairns' Hoose standards. We celebrate the commitment to embedding evaluation into the development of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose from the outset to support a culture of learning and reflection.

In January 2024, Sycamore was awarded Bairns' Hoose Affiliate status and the University of Edinburgh agreed to join the partnership and conduct a formative evaluation. The aim of the evaluation was to learn about:

- children, young people and their families' experience of services and support in relation to safety, justice, rights and recovery following identification of abuse, including (but not limited to) their joint investigative interview
- the experiences of multi-agency professionals, including social work, police and service leads overseeing investigations, and strategic leads, in the partnership.

Evidence gathered in the evaluation primarily focused on the child or young person's journey through Sycamore Bairns' Hoose's service and system processes. We interviewed six children and young people (aged 9–16, four female and two male, all of whom had participated in an interview following the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) in the previous year) and 30 professionals from a broad range of services (social work, police, justice, health, education and the voluntary sector) who work with children and young people after abuse or maltreatment has been identified.

The report has four main sections: the current system for children and young people; findings from children and young people's interviews, findings from professional's interviews, and finally key learning points across the findings.

### ***The current system for children and young people after identification of abuse and maltreatment***

Within the current system, highly specialist support and advocacy services are effectively working along the child's Bairns' Hoose journey in Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian. Recently, significant improvements have been made in specific areas of intervention, including implementation of the SCIM for joint investigative interviews and the development of the Sycamore Centre building. Challenges lie in how these services connect into a seamless system to meet a child or young person's needs after abuse or maltreatment has been identified. There are gaps in the evidence related to coordination and case management across agencies, consistent criteria for allocating services, and whether these services have sufficient capacity to fully meet needs in a timely fashion. Further, it seems that some agencies who could naturally fit under the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose 'umbrella' are not currently identified in this way.

### ***Findings from children and young people's Interviews***

The evaluation started by examining children and young people's current experiences of services after identification of abuse or maltreatment. This report includes three composite case studies which blend aspects of the experiences of the six young people with whom we conducted in-depth interviews. While details have been changed for confidentiality and anonymity, all the scenarios represented were experienced by at least one young person and many of the words used come directly from the interviews. We present these case studies as a powerful tool for reflection and development.

There was much that children and young people found supportive in their interactions with professionals. Our interviewees identified details of these interactions, including aspects of the environment, that made them feel valued, seen and cared for. Challenges lay, however in ensuring strong connections between these interactions and across their whole Sycamore Bairns' Hoose journey. Clarity of communication and effective information sharing emerged as vital to manage children and young people's expectations and support them to better understand processes, professional roles and how decisions are made. This is particularly important at times and in contexts where there are long time lags between children's direct contact with professionals.

### ***Findings from professionals' interviews***

Professionals identified several key factors which are going well in the development of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. Some of these areas of confidence, including the Scottish Child Interview Model and multi-agency working around the interagency referral discussion, predate Bairns' Hoose but undoubtedly provide a solid foundation for its development. Developments identified that were specific to Bairns' Hoose included the use of the new space, the addition of specialist recovery support for over 12s from the STAR project, and an ongoing culture of learning and development. While these transformations were perceived positively, interviewees also identified changes necessary for the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose to meet the national Bairns' Hoose standards.

A single point of contact to provide both ongoing relational support and case coordination was recognised as necessary to improve children and young people's safety, justice and recovery journeys after abuse and maltreatment. Further, interviewees said that professional responses to children and young people's needs must be systemic and holistic, recognising both the complexity of children's needs and the wider service landscape they are required to navigate. Finally, there was a clear appetite to create a collective vision and shared action plan for moving the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose forward. The critical roles of education, justice, advocacy and recovery partners in responding to children's needs after abuse or maltreatment were emphasised. An expanded partnership for transformational change is vital.

### ***Conclusion: Joining the dots***

The report identifies eight key points drawn from the interviews with children, young people and professionals. These are presented to inform reflection and discussion to support the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose partnership fulfil our responsibility to work towards meeting the national Bairns' Hoose standards.

1. Within the unavoidably difficult context of dealing with the aftermath of abuse and maltreatment, all the children and young people we interviewed had had positive individual experiences with professionals who had helped and supported them. However, they did not experience these varied interactions with professionals as being joined up. Children and young people particularly wanted to see changes to their experiences of education and justice systems.

2. Children and young people wanted improved communication and information about what is happening to them and their case. Professionals acknowledged that this is a weakness in current practice, however, they often do not have access to information across all services to update children and young people. There is not always clarity about who is responsible for providing updates to children, young people and their families.
3. Most children and young people spoke about problematic impacts of the timing and pacing of their Sycamore Bairns' Hoose journey. The initial period, immediately after identification of abuse or maltreatment, was often described as overwhelming, involving multiple contacts from a variety of professionals not known to the child or young person. This was often followed by a period of less professional contact, characterised by uncertainty and a lack of information about their case, which made them feel they were left hanging.
4. Children and young people identified actions at the everyday relational level that could help them to feel valued, seen and cared for. These ways of working by professionals, and environments that support these ways of working, could have a big impact without necessarily significant resource implications.
5. Professionals across all agencies recognised that good work is being done and progress made to support children and young people. They also acknowledged that the system often lets children and young people down. Areas of most concern included: lack of consistency of communicating with children, young people and families; failure to keep children and young people informed of key decisions affecting them; the length of time the court processes take; timely recovery services not being available for all; lack of clarity about how decisions are made and by whom; and, finally, the particular challenges experienced by children and young people who do not have an allocated social worker.
6. There are perceived gaps in services for children and young people within the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose model. Simultaneously, the evaluation identified that there are relevant services working successfully with children and young people affected by abuse and maltreatment which are not currently operating under the Bairns' Hoose umbrella. Bringing these services into the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose collective would plug some of the gaps and help identify where resources might be most effectively targeted.
7. The evaluation identified no clear collective understanding or vision of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose model locally. Many professionals working with children and young people affected by abuse and maltreatment do not currently see themselves as part of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. Operational and third sector professionals, in particular, had a desire to engage in Sycamore Bairns' Hoose but were not sure of their place in it and how to become part of the drive to improve services for children and young people who have experienced abuse or maltreatment.
8. We acknowledge that the majority of children and young people we interviewed had not yet been through the justice system. We also note the practical challenges we had which made it difficult to speak to professionals working in the Courts and the Children's Hearing systems. Further research is needed to explore the challenges and opportunities available to improve children and young people's justice experiences.

The above learning points come directly from data collected for this evaluation. The list was shared and discussed with 40 professionals at a dissemination workshop, Making Sense of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose, who identified three additional learning points that are shared below. A full account of this event can be found in the companion briefing paper to this report at: <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/research/research-project/bairns-hoose-barnahus-evaluation-scotland>

9. Workshop participants recognised the challenge for all professionals working in this field and the high risks of burnout and vicarious trauma. As such they emphasised the need to prioritise access to high quality and appropriate support for staff across the workforce.
10. Workshop participants identified gaps in services supporting children and their families, particularly in the fields of justice, advocacy and recovery. It is considered vital to identify key risks within the Bairns' Hoose system resulting from these gaps and to develop clear processes to manage and escalate these risks strategically. In particular, the importance of new and sustained funding to assess and manage these risks was emphasised.
11. Given the evidence in this report, workshop participants identified an essential need for children and their families to have a single point of contact through their Bairns' Hoose journey. It is envisaged that this single point of contact will provide a consistent relationship to help them navigate the multiple agencies they will encounter and provide access to understandable, timely information.

Workshop participants undertook a ranking exercise related to the 11 learning points above. The clear top 3 learning points recommended for priority action are:

**First priority:** development of a single point of contact point of contact for children, young people and their families (learning point 11).

**Second priority:** improved communication with children, young people and families is required (learning point 2).

**Third priority:** identifying current services and gaps in provision, inviting a wider range of existing services into the Bairns' Hoose collective while recognising that they need capacity and resources to undertake this additional work (learning point 6).

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## Glossary and Acronyms

Bairns' Hoose	Scottish adaptation of the European Barnahus model
Bairns' Hoose Affiliate	An organisation or group that works in collaboration with the Scottish Bairns' Hoose initiative. Affiliates are not Pathfinders but receive development funding to work toward implementing Bairns' Hoose standards and testing the model in their local contexts, often with the goal of eventually becoming a full Bairns' Hoose.
Bairns' Hoose Pathfinders	A Bairns' Hoose pathfinder is a local Scottish partnership selected to test and develop the Bairns' Hoose model, a child-centred, trauma-informed approach to supporting child victims and witnesses of crime
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. See Section 1.1 for a fuller explanation of the model.
The Cairn Service	A service run by 6VT City Youth Cafe providing person-centred support to any child or young person in Edinburgh and Lothians who has experienced any type of crime, whether this was reported or not.
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
Children and young people	Any persons under 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 and families	Children, young people their caregivers and wider close family members such as siblings. In this report the term specifically refers to children, young people and non-abusing caregivers/family members.
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 and young people 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
E-IRD	Electronic interagency referral discussion
ESMAC	Equally Safe Multi-Agency Centre
IRD	Interagency referral discussion
JII	Joint investigative interview
PPU	Public Protection Unit: The section of a police force dedicated to ensuring the safety of those in danger of becoming victims of crimes such as child sexual exploitation, modern slavery and human trafficking and domestic abuse.
The Promise	The outcome of Scotland's Independent Care Review: a pledge to care-experienced children and young people that they will grow up loved, safe and respected
The Promise Scotland	An organisation that exists to support Scotland in keeping its promise to care-experienced people
SCIM	Scottish Child Interview Model
SCRA	Scottish Children's Hearing System
SCTS	Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service
The STAR Project	Edinburgh Rape Crisis project supporting young people aged 12–21 in Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian who have experienced any kind of sexual harm
Sycamore Bairns' Hoose	The Sycamore Bairns' Hoose is the vision and multi-agency approach being developed by the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose Affiliate group. A child-centred multi-agency approach supporting child victims and witnesses of abuse and harm across Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian.
The Sycamore Centre	A multi-agency facility providing trauma-informed support for survivors of sexual violence and gender-based violence in Edinburgh and the Lothians. It has two child-friendly houses that make up The Sycamore Bairns' Hoose.
Sycamore Support	The STAR Project's specialist service for young people aged 12+ who have been through a JII in Edinburgh, East Lothian or Midlothian.
Sycamore Bairns' Hoose strategic group	The Bairns' Hoose Affiliate group developing the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. At the time of writing, the group is made up of representatives from Police Scotland, NHS Lothian, City of Edinburgh Council, Midlothian Council and East Lothian Council.

# 1. Introduction

When they are identified as having experienced abuse or maltreatment, children and young people often come into contact with multiple systems and services (child protection, judiciary, health and third sector) to address their needs relating to justice, safety and recovery. These intersecting systems can be confusing and difficult for children, young people and their families to navigate, creating the potential for further harm. The Sycamore Bairns' Hoose aims to provide a coordinated, multi-agency approach to supporting children and young people from across Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian who have experienced abuse or maltreatment. This report provides an evaluation of the early stages of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose's work, based on in-depth interviews with a small number of children and young people who have had support from the agencies involved in Sycamore Bairns' Hoose as well as professionals involved in multidisciplinary working in the locality.

This report has five sections. We begin by introducing the origins and function of the multidisciplinary Bairns' Hoose approach, which is based on the European Barnahus model. The second section describes the current system for children and young people who experience abuse or maltreatment in Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian. We then explore the findings from children and young people and present three composite case studies which blend aspects of the experiences of the six young people we interviewed. The fourth section organises learning from professionals under two broad categories: key strengths and key areas for improvement. It is interesting to note that all the key themes identified by children and young people were reflected in the interviews with professionals, demonstrating broad agreement on the strengths of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose approach and areas that need improvement. The report concludes with a series of key learning points presented to inform reflection and discussion to support the ongoing development of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose.

## 1.1 What is Barnahus?

The European Barnahus model is an internationally recognised evidence-based model for children, young people and families affected by abuse and maltreatment, which aims to meet children and young people's needs while also reducing the potential of secondary victimisation. It is a multidisciplinary child protection model which addresses children and young people's needs by offering multiple coordinated services in a child-friendly environment. Barnahus is designed to be formally embedded into national systems and underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Barnahus means 'children's house' in Icelandic. Because of the name, it is often assumed that people stay in a children's house, but that is not often the case.

It is founded on children's rights to recovery, justice, safety, and participation, often described as the 'four rooms' of Barnahus. It brings together four key service areas under one roof:

- justice services, including forensic interviews;
- health services, including medical assessments and examinations;
- child welfare and protection;
- recovery support including holistic therapeutic assessment and services for the child or young person and non-offending family members.

Workers cooperate and together assess the child or young person's situation and decide how to best support and follow up based on their unique needs and circumstances. The metaphor of the house includes

a sheltering ‘roof’ representing professional expertise and capacity enabled through collaboration, consultation, training, and awareness-raising on the rights of the child or young person to a non-violent childhood.



**Figure 1. The four rooms of the Barnahus. Image from ‘About Barnahus’ accessed from the Barnahus Network website (accessed 18.8.25)**

## 1.2 Bairns’ Hoose in Scotland

In Scotland there is a broad national agenda for change to embed children’s rights, keep The Promise,<sup>1</sup> and improve the experience of vulnerable witnesses in court processes. Bairns’ Hoose is a cornerstone of the Scottish Government’s programme for change. It aims to provide all children and young people who have been victims of or witnesses to abuse or violence – as well as children under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour has caused significant harm – access to trauma-informed recovery support and justice. Based on the European Barnahus model, Bairns’ Hoose is a transformational, whole-system and multidisciplinary approach to delivering safety, justice, health and recovery to child victims and witnesses of abuse or maltreatment.

The Scottish Government has funded six Bairns’ Hoose ‘Pathfinders’ and four Affiliates (2024–2027) with the aim of trialling and understanding Bairns’ Hoose development in different contexts across a variety of regions in Scotland in a staged roll-out (2023–2027). There will be significant learning from these sites, for example understanding multidisciplinary working in complex child protection contexts; the experience of children, young people and their families through the rooms of the Bairns’ Hoose; and the different contexts and mechanisms of systems change to improve outcomes for children and young people affected by abuse or maltreatment. This knowledge will help inform the development the Scottish Bairns’ Hoose model, underpinned by the national Bairns’ Hoose standards (Healthcare Improvement Scotland, 2023). The Sycamore Bairns’ Hoose partnership, made up of three local authorities (Edinburgh, East Lothian and Midlothian), NHS Lothian and Police Scotland, was awarded Affiliate Bairns’ Hoose funding in 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> The Promise: The outcome of Scotland’s Independent Care Review – a pledge to care-experienced children and young people that they will grow up loved, safe and respected

### 1.3 Development of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose

Several separate yet coinciding factors influenced the context for change in Edinburgh and the Lothians between 2017 and 2024. A strong pre-existing multidisciplinary child protection partnership between NHS Lothian, Police Scotland and local authorities was core to the subsequent developments. Historically these partners worked closely together, building mutual trust and knowledge over a long period. Before the Scottish Government began to implement the Bairns' Hoose programme in 2022, partners in Edinburgh and the Lothians had already established a multidisciplinary approach to supporting children and young people who had experienced maltreatment and abuse.

The partners' vision focused on improving the interagency referral discussion (IRD) process and embedding the new Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) for joint investigative interviews (JII). The new model was being rolled out nationally and tested in localities across Scotland while the Bairns' Hoose agenda for change was beginning to build momentum nationally (2018–2022). At the same time the Equally Safe Multi-Agency Centre (ESMAC) in Edinburgh was at an early stage of development and a site was being sought to house the new multidisciplinary SCIM service. Midlothian and East Lothian local authorities saw the benefits of a fixed site multidisciplinary project and agreed to become part of a partnership developing the service. A site was identified – an old children and young people's residential unit – and NHS Lothian bought it in 2021. This site was named the Sycamore Centre and opened in April 2024.

The Sycamore Centre is a trauma-informed, multi-agency facility in Edinburgh which provides coordinated support for adults and children who have experienced sexual abuse, trauma, or harm (including physical assault). It includes two specially designed child-friendly houses, Rowan and Aspen, with facilities for JII, recovery support, general health checks and the potential for future live court links. The first JII took place in the Sycamore Centre in April 2024.

The considerable work and vision of different individuals and agencies over this period provides important insight into the history of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose.

Initially these local initiatives progressed as separate stand-alone projects but over time the partners began to recognise the significance of linking the projects relating to children and young people. For example, best evidence forensic interviews being conducted through the new SCIM could be undertaken at the Sycamore Centre. This then was considered part of the new multi-agency service (ESMAC) which ultimately (following delays in opening due to COVID-19) began to be seen as a core component of the multidisciplinary work to be delivered through the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. Thus, Bairns' Hoose Affiliate funding successfully sought in 2023–2024 was a catalyst for further change, providing an opportunity to build on the original multidisciplinary vision while focusing on the recovery journey for children and young people, landscaping the building, live links to courts and a partnership with the University of Edinburgh to undertake a formative evaluation of the Sycamore Centre focusing on the child or young person's journey. The Affiliate funding has brought opportunity for further transformational systems change through a multidisciplinary Bairns' Hoose partnership. At the same time, the funding brings with it the responsibility for the partnership to shape the Centre's work based on the Bairns' Hoose national standards (2023).

## 1.4 Sycamore Bairns' Hoose formative evaluation

In January 2024, the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose partnership was awarded affiliate status and the University of Edinburgh agreed to join the partnership to conduct a formative evaluation of the first phase of development. The aim of the formative evaluation<sup>2</sup> was to learn about:

- the experiences of children, young people and their families of service and support in relation to safety, justice, rights and recovery following identification of abuse, including (but not limited to) their joint investigative interview
- the experiences of multi-agency professionals, including social work, police and service leads overseeing investigations, and strategic leads, in the partnership.

Evidence gathered in the evaluation primarily focused on the child or young person's journey through Sycamore Bairns' Hoose's service and system processes. We interviewed six children and young people (aged 9–16, four female and two male, all of whom had participated in a SCIM interview in the previous year) and 30 professionals from a broad range of services (social work, police, justice, health, education and voluntary sector) who work with children and young people after abuse or maltreatment has been identified. One of the young people was keen to participate but did not want to speak directly to the researcher, so the questions were sent to her mother who discussed them and then talked to the researcher. The interviews with professionals included, among others, all members of the strategic group for Sycamore Bairns' Hoose, frontline staff working closely with Sycamore Bairns' Hoose, and professionals who may not currently consider themselves to be a part of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose.

The evidence gathered provides a rich snapshot of children, young people and professionals' experiences between February and June 2025, with the purpose of stimulating reflection and discussion to aid the ongoing development of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. We do not suggest that these experiences and opinions represent those of all children, young people and professionals who have contact with Sycamore Bairns' Hoose.

The evaluation design reflects a commitment to ensuring that children and young people's experiences are at the centre of the Bairns' Hoose model and the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose development. However, we recognise that the nature of the experiences we were asking about may be difficult or sensitive to retell. For this reason, interviews were designed to maximise children's and young people's choice and control, following trauma-informed research principles (Beckett et al., 2025). The research was subject to the highest ethical approval (level 3) from the School of Social and Political Science ethics panel at the University of Edinburgh and ethical approval was also given by NHS Lothian Caldicott. (See Appendix 1 for a more extensive discussion on the approach taken to gather evidence for the study).

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<sup>2</sup> A formative evaluation enables key stakeholders to gather and analyse learning and feedback during the development or implementation of a programme and use this to inform programme development – rather than waiting for an end result.

## 2. The current system for children and young people who experience abuse or maltreatment in Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian

### 2.1 The national picture

Across Scotland, children and young people's experiences of services and support following identification of abuse vary, depending on their circumstances, identities and available services. Previous evidence (SCTS, 2015, Galloway et al., 2017) indicated relatively consistent shortcomings in meeting children and young people's needs, including siloed working, lack of advocacy or recovery support, and retraumatising justice responses. A recent study identified key challenges for children and young people including:

- lack of support and information to navigate complex and siloed professional systems
- requirements to engage with processes and spaces that were significantly distressing and at times retraumatising
- lack of access to timely and appropriate recovery or therapeutic support
- extended delays and adjournments to justice processes (Mitchell et al., 2023).

These findings mirror wider studies on child victims from the UK and other high-income settings (Plotnikoff and Woolfson, 2019; Brown et al., 2022; Field and Katz, 2022).

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, 2022). Expectations regarding multidisciplinary working in Scotland are supported and underpinned by policy and legislation such as *Getting It Right For Every Child* (GIRFEC)<sup>3</sup>, and the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*<sup>4</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 (NES) National Trauma Transformation Programme<sup>5</sup>, the Independent Care Review and 'the Promise' (including children's hearing system re-design)<sup>6</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.

### 2.2 The local picture: Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian

This section outlines the professional contacts and processes that a child or young person in Edinburgh City, Midlothian or East Lothian currently experiences when abuse or maltreatment is identified (see Figure 2). It is based on information provided by Sycamore partners and other professional interviewees and includes services provided by core Sycamore Bairns' Hoose partners and by others who currently sit outside the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose strategic group but whose services align to Bairns' Hoose standards (Healthcare Improvement Scotland, 2023).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/policies/girfec/national-practice-model/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2014/8>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.traumatransformation.scot/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://thepromise.scot/>

It is recognised that what is described below is a simplified picture of what may, in reality, occur to support children and young people’s unique and often complex circumstances. Some areas of complexity noted by those we spoke to included:

- Different entry and exit points exist along the pathway for children and young people depending on the child’s needs and resources available at any one point in time.
- For many children there is not just one incident of abuse or maltreatment which means that they may, at the point of disclosure, already be working with professionals in relation to these issues. In particular, whether or not they already have an allocated social worker makes a significant difference to the experiences of children and their families navigating the system.
- Children may move between local authorities to receive services, but this is not always consistent. For example, they may move to a different a local authority for education but still have an allocated social worker in their home authority.

### **Initial service contact and responses**

There is recognition at a local level that each child’s journey through the Bairns’ Hoose will be different depending upon the unique circumstances and experiences of that child. The first phase of professional responses following identification or allegation of abuse or maltreatment against a child or young person includes interagency referral discussions (IRD), joint investigative interviews and health assessments. These are likely to take place within a relatively short period following disclosure or identification of abuse (usually two weeks). This initial response period appears to form the primary focus of early Bairns’ Hoose development in the Sycamore Affiliate.

Table 1 provides a brief overview of the number of IRDs and JIIs that took place between April 2024 and July 2025 across the three areas involved in the Sycamore Bairns’ Hoose and the outcomes.

	East Lothian	Midlothian	City of Edinburgh Council
<b>Time frame</b>	May 2024- April 2025		
<b>Number of IRD’s in the timeframe</b>	440		838
<b>Number of IRDs result in a referral for a JII?</b>	144		221
<b>How many JII took place</b>	126		195
<b>What percentage of JIIs take place within the Sycamore Centre?</b>	96%	90%	75%
<b>What percentage of SCIM JIIs result in a criminal report?</b>	65%	Data not available	73%

**Table 1: Numbers of IRDs and JIIs across the Sycamore Bairns’ Hoose geographic area**

### **Interagency Referral Discussion (IRD)**

All child protection concerns in Scotland are recorded via an IRD process with statutory input from health, social work and police representatives. Although the education service is a standard IRD partner in some areas, this is not the case for the three local authorities involved in the Sycamore Bairns’ Hoose. Once an IRD is initiated by one of these representatives, it is flagged on an ‘electronic IRD’ system (or ‘E-IRD’) for review

and input by a representative from the other statutory agencies. In more complex cases a face-to-face discussion (usually via a video call) is likely to be initiated to support joint reflection and decision making.

IRDs allow a decision to be made about immediate follow-up actions. This may include the need for:

- a health assessment or examination (including forensic medical examinations)
- a joint investigative interview – sometimes referred to as ‘SCIM’ due to the now standardised use of the Scottish Child Interview Model.
- child protection referrals and actions, including safety planning, child planning meetings and/or child protection planning meetings
- liaison with or onward referrals to other services, including schools or sexual health screening,

Professionals from health, social work and the police interviewed for this study expressed significant confidence in their E-IRD systems and processes. Strengths of the E-IRD system were noted to be the potential for additional information to be added to IRDs after an initial discussion and the robust process in place to review all IRDs before they were closed (reported as usually taking place within two weeks). This ensured follow-up actions were made or allocated.

### Health assessments or examinations

Health sector input into IRDs and immediate actions are coordinated by a child protection health coordinator based within the Child Protection Hub at the Royal Hospital for Children and Young People Edinburgh (known locally at the ‘Sick Kids’ Hospital) which serves all three local authorities involved in the Sycamore Bairns’ Hoose. Depending on the nature of a concern raised at an IRD, one of three different assessments may be initiated. For under 16-year-olds, most of these take place at the hospital and are paediatrician led.

The three types of child health assessments are:

- **A comprehensive medical assessment** (also referred to as **a child protection medical assessment**). These take place where there is a concern about welfare needs, neglect or historical injuries. They may involve a range of hospital-based staff such as radiologists or endocrinologists.
- **A forensic medical examination**. For children under 16 these take place in the hospital’s child-friendly Acorn Suite and are led by a consultant paediatrician with police officers present. Forensic medical examinations can be initiated for either sexual or physical abuse and are required to take place within a specific timeframe from the alleged abuse (sometimes referred to as the ‘forensic window’) and almost always prior to a JII. Paediatricians work with specially trained play workers to support children and families during the examination. For young people aged 16 and 17, adult forensic medical pathways will be followed.
- **A single doctor examination**. These are usually initiated for historical sexual abuse concerns or allegations and provide additional information for child protection investigations, follow-up health input and/or reassurance about a child or young person’s symptoms.

Additional onward health referrals may also be made – including (though not limited) to health visitors (for under-fives), school nurses (for over fives), sexual health services, dentistry, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), or specialist sexual abuse mental health services (the Meadows, see ‘NHS mental health support’ below).

### Joint investigative interviews (JII)

Although not all referrals for a JII were undertaken (potentially due to a child or young person not wishing or being able to complete one), the majority of referrals to JII are noted to take place (see Table 1).

Professionals aim for JIIs to take place within the shortest timeframe possible accounting for appropriate planning, resources and the child or young person's and their family's needs. JIIs are designed to record the best possible evidence for use in both criminal and child protection investigations and minimise unnecessary repeat interviews.

All JIIs across East and Midlothian and Edinburgh now use the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) (Holland et.al 2025) ensuring they are led by a specialist trained social worker and police pairing ('SCIM interviewers'). The development and use of SCIM was identified as a key foundation for Sycamore Bairns' Hoose and is the process around which further developments appear to be centred.

There are three teams of SCIM interviewers within Sycamore: one each for East Lothian, Midlothian and Edinburgh. Those in East and Midlothian coordinate closely while the one in Edinburgh operates more independently. The SCIM approach embeds detailed preparatory work liaising with those known to the child or young person (for example teachers or social workers), ensuring the interview can be tailored to the child or young person's needs. In some cases, SCIM interviewers meet a child or young person and or parent/carers in advance of an interview to build rapport, answer questions and ensure they are fully informed. In others, information about what to expect in a JII is provided via video, leaflets or phone call.

A key element of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose development to date has been the opening of the specially designed child-friendly houses, 'Aspen' and 'Rowan', at the Sycamore Centre. The majority of JIIs now take place within one of these houses, each of which has two JII interview suites. The space is designed to maximise children's, young people's and professionals' comfort and wellbeing during an interview, including through provision of dedicated space for family and supporters, and to ensure high quality recordings for use in Children's Hearings or court. The development of the Sycamore Centre was identified as having made a distinct improvement to children and young people's experiences. A number of alternative spaces, including schools and local authority buildings, continue to be used occasionally where children, young people or families are deemed to have specific needs that make this necessary.

The Edinburgh SCIM team is co-located in the Sycamore Centre. The SCIM teams from East Lothian and Midlothian are not co-located but plan and conduct JIIs at the Sycamore Centre.

### ***Referrals and ongoing follow-up support after the IRD and JII***

Children, young people and family's needs in this phase vary according to the nature of abuse, harm or risk experienced, their relationship to the perpetrator, and existing relationships and protective resources.

### **Child planning and protection**

Ongoing assessments and referrals in relation to child protection followed statutory and policy guidelines and processes. As noted, expectations regarding multidisciplinary working in Scotland are supported and underpinned by policy and legislation such as *Getting It Right For Every Child* (GIRFEC), the *National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland* (updated 2023) and the *Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014*.

Social work input is determined by the nature of the ongoing risk the child or young person faces and could include:

- **GIRFEC child planning meetings.** These multidisciplinary meetings occur across a continuum of need and risk for children and their families, which means that these may already be taking place at the time abuse or maltreatment is identified. As such, depending on the level of risk and need, a social worker may already be actively involved with the child and family as their lead professional.

- **Social work allocation and child protection planning meetings.** This occurs for children or young people who have an existing allocated social worker or where the level of risk within their immediate family setting requires close ongoing oversight. This applies to all Looked After Children, that is those removed from home because of safety concerns, and children or young people already under social work supervision.

### **Police investigations**

Police investigations coming from IRDs area are covered by police from Child Protection Investigation Units (CPIU). Police from these teams lead further investigations and, where an evidential threshold is met, prepare the case for delivery to the Crown Office and/or Procurator Fiscal Services (COPFS) and can provide evidence for the Children's Hearings system.<sup>7</sup> Police investigations are often protracted processes, taking many months during which there may be few updates. Previous research (Houghton et al., 2022) has indicated that during this time the onus is often on children, young people and families to seek updates about the progress of their case. Depending on the nature of the allegation, a police liaison person may be assigned to support with this. For some children who undertake a JII, police investigations mark the end of the 'justice journey' through a decision to take no further action (see Table 1). Representatives from Police PPU are represented on the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose strategic group.

### **Sycamore Support (and the STAR project)**

Sycamore Support is the specialist 'recovery support' service, led by the STAR project, which is the Rape Crisis Edinburgh service for young people. Sycamore Support serves those aged 12 and over who experience gender-based violence (purposefully defined broadly). Children and young people are referred to Sycamore Support directly by SCIM team members following a JII or can choose to self-refer at a later date. The service does not currently have a waiting list and is delivered by counsellors and therapists employed by Rape Crisis Edinburgh. The service offers children and young people a limited number (usually six) of one-to-one sessions alongside an offer of support to parents or carers. Sessions are broadly structured to deliver psycho-educative and therapeutic inputs informed by the work of Judith Herman (2015) and drawing on systemic practice. There is currently no equivalent provision for children under 12 years and/or those whose experience of abuse could not be construed as gender-based violence. Sycamore Support is funded via Bairns' Hoose Affiliate funding from the Scottish Government.

### **Sexual health screening and support**

Sexual health screening and support are available to children and young people within the Sycamore area through the Chalmers Centre. As an NHS service, Chalmers Centre staff have access to the E-IRD system which they can feed into and review. Information from professionals working at Chalmers may also feed into JII preparation. The Chalmers Centre has integrated youth work which was described as enabling a degree of recovery support to young people who have experienced abuse, but the nature of this service was not made clear. Chalmers' services were described as being delivered in a busy clinic environment serving both young people and adults. However, it was noted that there was potential to lengthen appointment times and adapt scheduling to offer young people a more bespoke service.

### **NHS mental health support**

Statutory mental health assessment and support are primarily delivered through NHS Lothian Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Children and young people who undergo a JII and have mental health needs are subject to the same pathways for assessment and support as any other children and young

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<sup>7</sup> The Children's Hearings system is a non-court-based tribunal system in which decisions about the safety and welfare of children and young people 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.

people, with the exception of those who have experienced sexual abuse, who can access assessment and support via a multi-agency team (including psychologists and a range of therapists) from The Meadows Child and Adolescent Trauma Team (informally referred to as The Meadows). The Meadows' support is family inclusive with direct individual sessions offered to parents and carers when considered to be needed.

The Meadows service accepts referrals from anyone, so there is no specific pathway (or coordination) for children and young people after a JII. Meadows staff noted that after initial appointments, most children and young people will wait at least six months before regular sessions are offered (with exceptions where there is a suicide risk, risk to others, risk of placement breakdown, or where a young person is pregnant). The duration of support from The Meadows varies between a few months and years – with ongoing sessions subject to regular review.

### **Education**

Schools are recognised to play a highly significant role in children and young people's lives following a disclosure of abuse (and are often places of first disclosure and/or where abuse is experienced). However, schools are not formally recognised as Bairns' Hoose partners. Schools are recognised by multidisciplinary professionals to be a lead partner in terms of child protection and pastoral support. School staff may support safety planning (particularly where another pupil is alleged to have caused harm), hold a child or young person's lead professional role, or provide pastoral care through school counselling services, school nurses, pastoral leads or more informal support roles.

### ***Children's hearings and criminal prosecutions***

A significant number of children and young people who undergo a JII have their cases progress to either Children's Hearings or a criminal prosecution, although accurate figures are not currently available. Neither the Scottish Children's Reporters Association (SCRA), which leads hearings, nor representatives from COPFS or Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service (SCTS) were represented on the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose strategic group and subsequently there is limited information about the specific nature of their role within the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose umbrella.

### **Children's Hearings processes**

Where there are concerns about a child or young person's care and protection which necessitate compulsory measures of supervision, they will be referred to the Children's Hearings system. For a Children's Hearing to take place there must be a legal basis for referral (under the Children's Hearings (Scotland) Act 2011), and voluntary measures must not be sufficient to effect change. This means that even if there has been a disclosure of harm or abuse, compulsory measures may not be required to ensure the child or young person's safety and welfare.

### **Criminal prosecutions**

Depending on the nature of harm, a child's or young person's case could be heard at a Summary, Sheriff and Jury, or High court, and their experience and entitlements would vary on that basis. Many of the interviewees recognised that the timeframe for cases reaching court were likely to be protracted – stretching over months or years. National guidance ensures that special measures (such as the option to give evidence via a remote live link) are available to all child witnesses to minimise potential stress (and distress). All children and young people whose cases are heard in High Courts are now entitled to give evidence in advance of the main trial via an Evidence by Commissioner hearing. Edinburgh has one of four Scottish Evidence by Commissioner facilities, which are designed to be specialist trauma-informed environments where vulnerable witnesses can give pre-recorded evidence away from the court. These suites are used to reduce stress and the risk of re-traumatisation for witnesses by allowing them to give their evidence in a

safe, managed setting before a commissioner (usually a judge) rather than attending an intimidating court building. The recorded evidence is then shown in court.<sup>8</sup>

Professionals noted there are aspirations for a remote live link to court within the Sycamore Centre buildings, although the timeframe for this was unclear. In addition, several local and national initiatives led by COPFS and SCTS (such as child-friendly citation letters and the Edinburgh child witness pilot) may also improve children and young people's court experiences within the Sycamore area.

### **Court support and advocacy**

There is no specific court advocacy service attached to Sycamore Bairns' Hoose but the Cairn Service (part of 6VT Edinburgh City Youth Cafe) provides court advocacy for all victims of crime aged 10 years and over living across the three Bairns' Hoose regions. Referrals to the Cairn Service can be made by any service or agency, and a large number of referrals are self-referrals after engagement with other services provided by 6VT. In addition, Edinburgh Women's Aid provides specialist domestic abuse court advocacy via their Edinburgh Domestic Abuse Court Service – including some provision for child witnesses – in domestic abuse court cases.

## **2.3 Concluding thoughts about the current system**

Highly specialist support and advocacy services and skills clearly exist along the child or young person's full Bairns' Hoose journey in Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian. Challenges lie in how these services connect into a seamless system to meet the needs of the child or young person and the investigation. There are gaps related to coordination and case management across agencies, consistent criteria for allocating services, and whether these services have sufficient capacity to fully meet needs in a timely fashion. Further, it seems that some agencies who could naturally fit under the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose umbrella are not currently identified in this way.

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<sup>8</sup> Scottish Government, 'Pre-recording witness evidence', <https://www.gov.scot/policies/victims-and-witnesses/pre-recording-of-evidence-criminal-trials>.

## **3. Findings from children and young people**

The evaluation examined children and young people's current experiences of services after identification of abuse or maltreatment. The three composite case studies presented below blend aspects of the experiences of the six young people with whom we conducted in-depth interviews. While details have been changed for confidentiality and anonymity, all the scenarios represented were experienced by at least one young person and many of the words used come directly from the interviews.

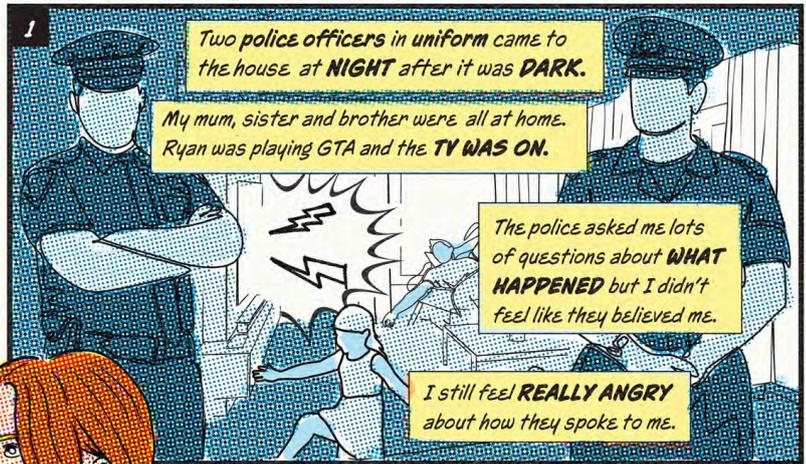
We present these case studies as a powerful tool for reflection and development. Themes from the data that informed these stories follow.

### **3.1 Case studies**

See the following pages.

My name is Dorota and I'm 15. I live in a house in a small town in East Lothian with my Mum, Agnieszka she's an office manager, and my Dad - who's called Craig, and he's a cleaner. I'm the oldest child in my family and I've got a younger sister Ana - she's 7, and a younger brother Ryan who is 12. I go to my local secondary school where I'm coming towards the end of S4. In my spare time I play football and play for the local football team and I'm really into music.

About a year ago I told my friend about something horrible that had happened to me at a party a few weeks before. I'd been raped by someone I thought was a friend - he's an S5 boy and he goes to the same school as me. My pal told me she really thought I needed to tell another adult about what had happened and in the end I managed to tell my mum a bit about it which was really embarrassing and stressful but then she phoned the police.



Two police officers in uniform came to the house at NIGHT after it was DARK.

My mum, sister and brother were all at home. Ryan was playing GTA and the TV WAS ON.

The police asked me lots of questions about WHAT HAPPENED but I didn't feel like they believed me.

I still feel REALLY ANGRY about how they spoke to me.

A few days later my mum got a phone call inviting me to come to an interview at the SYCAMORE CENTRE.



They emailed us a video link to watch which explained where we would go and what would happen and stuff.

THE INTERVIEW was long and hard but I think it was as good as it could have been...



I was worried about who would get to hear the recording of the interview, but they reassured me.

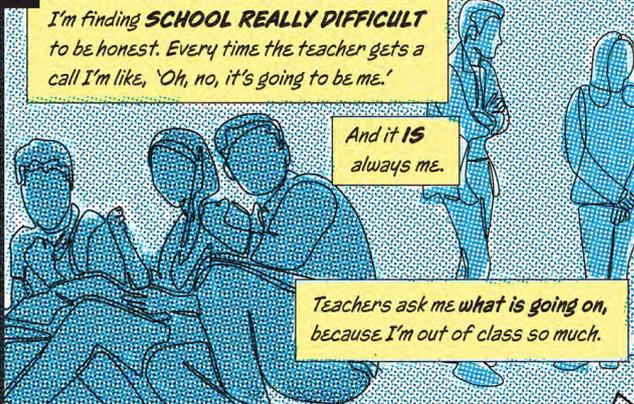
I sat on a huge sofa and the woman was on a little chair. There were lots of paintings and colour.

My mum and her friend sat in the kitchen area and drank tea.



It was good to know that they were there if I needed them.

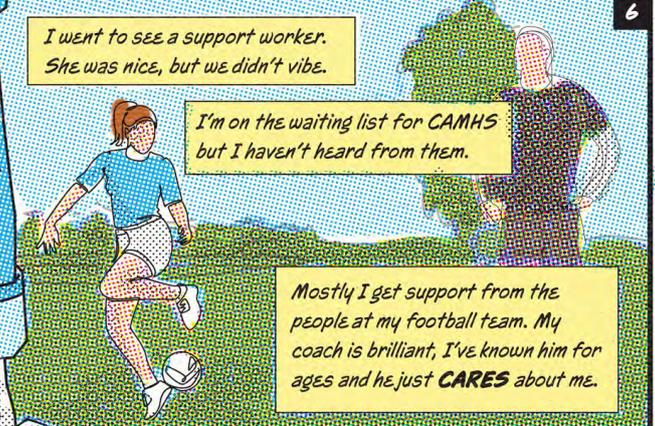
I'm finding SCHOOL REALLY DIFFICULT to be honest. Every time the teacher gets a call I'm like, 'Oh, no, it's going to be me.'



And it IS always me.

Teachers ask me what is going on, because I'm out of class so much.

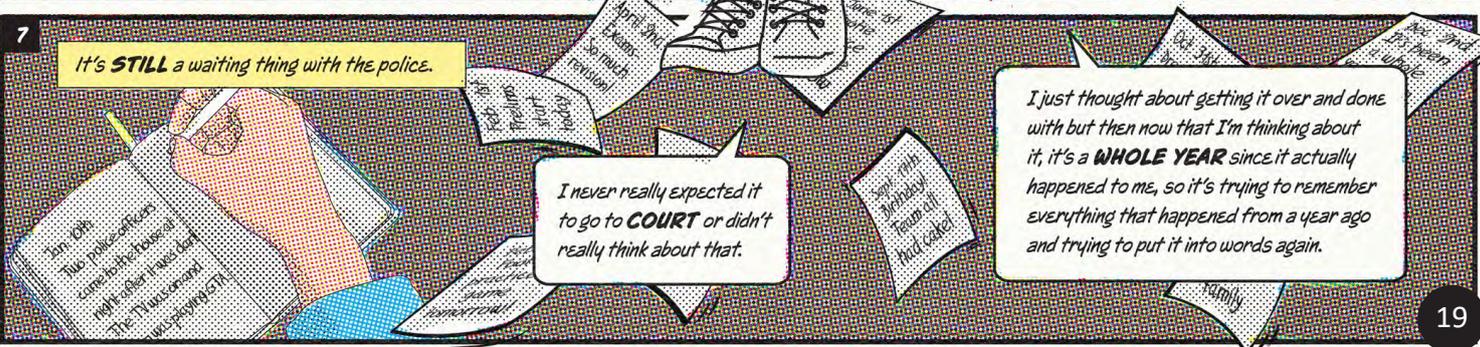
I went to see a support worker. She was nice, but we didn't vibe.



I'm on the waiting list for CAMHS but I haven't heard from them.

Mostly I get support from the people at my football team. My coach is brilliant, I've known him for ages and he just CARES about me.

It's STILL a waiting thing with the police.



I never really expected it to go to COURT or didn't really think about that.

I just thought about getting it over and done with but then now that I'm thinking about it, it's a WHOLE YEAR since it actually happened to me, so it's trying to remember everything that happened from a year ago and trying to put it into words again.

My name is Dorota and I'm 15. I live in a house in a small town in East Lothian with my Mum, Agnieska she's an office manager, and my Dad - whose called Craig, and he's a cleaner. I'm the oldest child in my family and I've got a younger sister Ana - she's 7, and a younger brother Ryan who is 12.

I go to my local secondary school where I'm coming towards the end of S4. In my spare time I play football and play for the local football team and I'm really into music.

About a year ago I told my friend about something horrible that had happened to me at a party a few weeks before. I'd been raped by someone I thought was a friend - he's an S5 boy and he goes to the same school as me. My pal told me she really thought I needed to tell another adult about what had happened and in the end I managed to tell my mum a bit about it which was really embarrassing and stressful but then she phoned the police.

After my mum's phone-call, two police came to the house really late at night. They asked me lots of questions about what happened and wrote some of it down. I don't remember everything but I know Ryan and Ana and mum were all around and it was really noisy and difficult. I remember feeling patronised by the way they asked me questions and I didn't feel like they believed me. I still feel really angry about how they spoke to me.

A few days later my mum got a phone call inviting me to come to an interview at the Sycamore Centre. They emailed us a video link to watch which explained what would happen at the interview - that felt helpful to know a bit about the interview and what the place was like.

My mum and her friend took me to the recorded interview. It was long and hard but I think it was as good as I think it could have been. I was allowed to take breaks whenever I needed and there were things like fidget toys and it was a comfortable place to sit. The interviewers were really kind and I didn't feel like they were judging me but it was nerve-wracking. My mum and her friend sat in the kitchen area and I knew that they were okay and had stuff to make tea with and lots of snacks. When I left there, I felt okay but I didn't know much about what would happen next.

I'm finding school really difficult to be honest. I keep getting called out of class to go and speak to different people and all the other people in my class are always asking me what happened but I don't want to tell them. I feel like my school didn't really know how to handle it when people started gossiping on social media about it. But I do get to Miss MacMillan every couple of weeks to talk about stuff and she is really nice.

I went back to the same place that I did my interview to see a woman who mum said might be able to help me. She was nice enough but I didn't really vibe with her. So someone said they would put me on the waiting list for CAMHS, that was ages ago and I haven't heard from them.

Mostly I get support from the people at my football team. My coach is brilliant, I've known him for ages and he just cares about me. We don't talk about what happened, but I know he knows. I go to a youth group too, I'm not sure if they know but they look out for me and we have fun, so I sometimes forget what happened.

I know the police have been investigating my rape but it has been over a year now and I haven't heard anything for months. I don't even know if he is going to get charged or what he'll be charged with. If it does go to court I don't know if I'll have to give evidence. I think they said they might be able to use the interview that I recorded for evidence but I might still have to go - I'm not sure. It's been ages, I'm not sure I can even remember everything exactly. And if I do go will I have to see him? I'm not sure I could do that.

My name is Eve and I'm 12. I have a pet rabbit called Percy who I really love - I want to get a dog but mum says we can't just now. I like drawing anime cartoons and spending time with my friends. I live in Edinburgh. I used to live in Leith but now we live in Wester Hailes - we had to move house because of dad.

When I lived in my old house I used to go to my friend's house to get away from my dad because he was always angry and he used to hit mum. Then there was one time where he really hurt her and he hit me too. It was really scary. We went to stay at my gran's that night and I haven't seen my dad since. It's been really horrible.

I remember the police coming to gran's.

We were all very upset.

Mum was crying and gran was REALLY angry at dad.

The police made mum cry EVEN MORE cos they kept asking questions about why she'd stayed with dad so long.

I think she STAYED because of ME.

So it is my fault that dad hurt her.

I was SO WORRIED about Percy because I thought dad might hurt him too.

I had to go to the SYCAMORE CENTRE to be interviewed.

Talking about something that you don't want to talk about for so long is quite annoying and frustrating because some parts you have to repeat yourself in appropriate language.

They were very KIND.

If I didn't want to answer a question or I felt uncomfortable answering it then they would give me a glass of water to calm myself.

At the end of the interview they asked if I'd like to TALK TO SOMEONE about everything that happened.

Mum thought it would be a good idea so I come and meet my worker at The SYCAMORE CENTRE every week. It helps me understand why I feel bad sometimes.

I'd never met a SOCIAL WORKER before and I didn't really know what they did. I still don't know the difference between them all but they were all nice.

There was one social worker who stayed longer, and she was really, really nice. If she said she'd do something, she just got right onto it, and done it. She got Percy back!

I had to CHANGE SCHOOLS. I still miss my old friends, but the teachers at the new school have been really kind.

Me and mum have meetings with the teachers every couple of months so they can see how I'm getting on in school and if there is any concerns and stuff.

I had to speak to the court on the computer, and they just asked me questions, and I answered them as truthfully as I could.

I HATED going to court. I told the truth but every time I answered there was another question and I felt like they didn't believe me.

At one point it felt like the judge was mad with me and then I got ANGRY.

They explained to me that the court decided that dad can't see me or mum anymore. I know that's a good thing.

I think I'm GLAD that I don't have to see him.

I'm not sure if I'll EVER see him again.

My name is Eve and I'm 12. I have a pet rabbit called Percy who I really love – I want to get a dog but mum says we can't just now. I like drawing anime cartoons and spending time with my friends. I live in Edinburgh. I used to live in Leith but now we live in Wester Hailes - we had to move house because of dad.

When I lived in my old house I used to go to my friend's house to get away from my dad because he was always angry and he used to hit mum. Then there was one time where he really hurt her and he hit me too. It was really scary. We went to stay at my gran's that night and I haven't seen my dad since. It's been really horrible.

I remember the police coming to gran's. We were all very upset. Mum was crying and gran was really angry at dad. The police made mum cry even more cos they kept asking questions and it sounded like they didn't believe her. I think she stayed because of me, so it is my fault that dad hurt her. I was so worried about Percy because I thought dad might hurt him too.

I had to go to the Sycamore Centre to be interviewed. There were two people and they had to record me. I could see the camera and that was a bit nerve-wracking but they were really nice and they told me what was going to happen and offered me a glass of water before we started talking. I had to take lots of breaks because there were so many questions, but they didn't mind how many breaks I took and I could go and talk to mum and gran when I needed to.

The room was nice, it wasn't like a bare room, there were lots of bright colours and a teddy that I cuddled. I remember there was a picture on the wall behind the woman who was interviewing me and I just stared at it when they asked the most difficult questions. At the end of the interview they asked if I'd like to talk to someone about everything that happened. Mum thought it would be a good idea so now I come and meet my worker at The Sycamore Centre every week. I really help her and it helps me understand why I feel bad sometimes.

There were so many people who came to gran's house straight after we moved there. I'd never met a social worker before and I didn't really know what they did. I still don't know the difference between them all, but they were all nice. It's all a bit mixed up in my head to be honest, they kept asking the same questions and sometimes I got frustrated cos I didn't know what was going on. Some of them were from Women's Aid. There was one who I saw on my own, not with my mum, she was lovely. At the beginning she helped me get Percy back from dad, I'd missed him so much. Then she helped me understand what was happening with all the court stuff. She was really patient with me when I got angry and she did what she said she'd do. I'm not sure if she really knew what would happen when we went to court though.

I had to change schools when we got the house we live in now. I still miss my old friends, but the teachers at the new school have been really kind. Mum told them what happened and they check in on me. Especially my reggie teacher and my art teacher, they go out of their way to make sure I'm okay and I've started drawing anime stories again. Sometimes I get upset and they let me take some time out or stay at home with mum and I don't get into trouble. Mum and me have meetings with the teachers every couple of months or so, so then they can see how I'm getting on in school and if there is any concerns and stuff.

I hated going to court. I hadn't heard anything for ages and I thought it was all over because everyone had gone quiet, but then I got told I had to go. Ji from Women's Aid was allowed to come with me. If she didn't I don't think I could've done it. I had to give evidence through a computer screen but I knew that dad could see me. First the judge asked me if I wanted him to take his wig off and that was good cos I think I would've laughed if he had kept it on. But then he started asking me questions and there were all these people asking me questions and I didn't know what to say. I told the truth but every time I answered there was another question and I felt like they didn't believe me. At one point it felt like the judge was mad with me and then I got angry.

Ji explained to me that the court decided that dad can't see me or mum anymore. I think I'm glad that I don't have to see him but it feels weird that I'm not ever sure if I'll see him again.

**MALIK'S STORY**

My name is **MALIK**. I'm 7. Lego is probably my favourite toy. Every birthday I ask for a different set, my favourites are the Star Wars ones but they are very expensive so I don't have the big ones. My aunty is teaching me how to swim and I go to judo on Friday afternoons after school.

I live in **Dalkeith** with my aunty. I used to live in **Loanhead** with mum and dad, but my dad was doing bad things to me that he shouldn't do and when I told my aunty she told lots of other people and I had to come live in **Dalkeith**.

I remember going to **SYCAMORE CENTRE**. We played **hide and seek** there, there were lots of rooms. I had to say **EVERY SINGLE** detail, which made me feel a bit uncomfortable. But then, we took breaks, and things.

In the breaks I had crisps and me and my aunty went for a walk. There was this fidget toy that was like a penguin and I played with it while I talked about things.

I've seen lots of social workers. The best one is called **RACHEL**, I see her every two weeks and one time she gave me a tiny **LEGO MODEL**.

Last week Rachel took me on a **VISIT TO THE COURT** because I think I might have to go there one day and tell the judge about what happened with dad.

There was a guy that we met, he works there, so he just came in the room with us, just a court person.

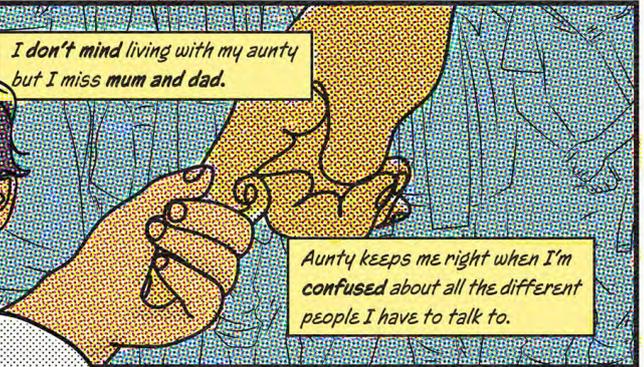
And then little bit after, maybe like a week, I don't know, that the **COURT** will happen, or trial, whatever it's called. And I'll be in, like, this little room with that man and I'll be able to, like, **SEE** in the court room from a TV.

I wish **RACHEL** or my **AUNTY** could come in with me but they are not allowed.

1 I think the police officer came to my house but I can't really remember. They were nice.



2 I don't mind living with my aunty but I miss mum and dad.



Aunty keeps me right when I'm confused about all the different people I have to talk to.

4 After the interview the police took me up to the hospital - I got to go in a **POLICE CAR**, that was cool.

It was embarrassing but the lady was kind and gave me a teddy bear to hold.



6 On the weeks I don't see Rachel I see Miss Smith in school. I get called out of class and I go into this **LITTLE ROOM** and talk to her. Sometimes she asks me things that I've already told Rachel and that is annoying.



My name is Malik. I'm 7. Lego is probably my favourite toy. Every birthday I ask for a different set, my favourites are the Star Wars ones but they are very expensive so I don't have the big ones. My aunty is teaching me how to swim and I go to judo on Friday afternoons after school.

I live in Dalkeith with my aunty. I used to live in Loanhead with mum and dad, but my dad was doing bad things to me that he shouldn't do and when I told my aunty she told lots of other people and I had to come live in Dalkeith.

I don't mind living with my aunty but I miss mum and dad. Mum didn't believe me when I told her what dad was doing so she stayed with him and I don't see her much anymore. I guess I see mum every few weeks. I hope she is okay.

My aunty looks after me and she helps me lots. It's been a bit scary living in a new place and making new friends but she is very kind and I talk to her all the time. Mostly she tells me what is happening with mum and dad and all the different people I have to talk to. I get confused who everyone is and what is happening sometimes cos there are just so many people.

I think the police officer came to my house but I can't really remember. They were nice.

I remember going to Sycamore Centre. We played hide and seek there, there were lots of rooms. There was a lady who asked me lots of questions and I had to tell them everything about dad and what he did to me. The woman asking the questions was nice. It was really long but in the breaks I had crisps and me and my aunty went for a walk. There was this fidget toy that was like a penguin and I played with it while I talked about things.

Straight from the interview the police took me up to the hospital - the woman who interviewed me and another man. I got to go in a police car, that was pretty cool. At the hospital a different man measured me and weighed me and looked at me. It was a bit embarrassing but they gave me a teddy to hold and the man was kind. I didn't see the people who took me there again, I don't know what happened to them.

There are lots of different social workers - I don't know what they all do. I think one of them is for my aunty. I see one called Rachel every two weeks, she is great - she gave me a present of a tiny lego model once. There are some other ones who I've only seen once. They are all okay but I get a bit confused. I think one is just for my Aunty? Rachel is the best, she is really kind and she doesn't make me talk if I don't want to.

On the weeks I don't see Rachel I see Miss Smith in school. I get called out of class and I go into this little room and talk to her. There is big clock that ticks really loudly and annoys me. She's very kind. Sometimes she asks me things that I've already told Rachel and that is annoying.

Last week Rachel took me on a visit to the court because I think I might have to go there one day and tell the judge about what happened with dad. We met this man who said he'll help me. I wish Rachel or my Aunty could come in with me on the day - I don't get why it has to be him. I know what the court is like now - that's good. But I hope I don't have to go, especially if it means I have to miss maths.

## 3.2 Themes from interviews with children and young people

A number of overarching themes emerged from the interviews.

### 3.2.1 *The pacing of the journey through Sycamore Bairns' Hoose was challenging*

All the children and young people we interviewed had experienced an initial period of intense professional responses following the identification of their abuse followed by a longer period of slower involvement with services. The initial period lasted from disclosure until after the SCIM interview, followed by a period of less contact with professionals or more regular contact with only one or two professionals (a social worker, CAMHS worker, Sycamore recovery worker or support worker in school).

#### **Initial response is often overwhelming**

Children and young people described the initial response period as 'busy' and overwhelming – with multiple contacts from different professionals and requests to engage in different processes and spaces over a short period of time. The influx of professional intervention in the immediate period after disclosure or identification of abuse or maltreatment often coincides with a period of significant family distress and/or potential changes in life circumstances for the child or young person. All the children and young people interviewed talked about feeling overwhelmed and confused during this period. Overwhelm appeared to represent a state where the child or young person does not know or is not able to understand what is happening and what will happen next – and may experience significant associated anxiety. Several talked about how this period is inherently difficult and will always be overwhelming, but that certain factors could either mitigate or increase this overwhelm.

#### **Emotional experiences of disclosure – ambivalent feelings in a vulnerable moment**

The two oldest young people interviewed were able to clearly articulate the emotional overwhelm that they felt after they had disclosed abuse. For one this was described as a sense of relief that they had finally told someone, quickly replaced by frustration at the response they received.

*I was really scared that I wasn't going to tell anybody and if I didn't tell anybody then the cycle would continue. So, I ran into guidance, and I immediately sat down and I spilled it all out in a second so that there was no turning back... I also don't know what I expected, but I thought that I would have expected more than what they gave. Maybe it's because ...I guess for them, like, my experience isn't as important for them as it is to me, but I just thought it would be more than what it was... So our conversation might have been 15 minutes, which wouldn't have been what I thought it would have been for the first time of me telling somebody this, and for it to be made a report and be sent to the police. (Child 1)*

This sense of frustration was superseded by a fear that they wouldn't be believed, resulting in a period of obsessively collecting evidence to support what they were saying. The second young person talked about the disclosure in terms of losing control, saying that everything gathered pace very quickly and they had no control over what happened. This young person described the overwhelm as so severe that, if they had the choice again, they might choose not to disclose.

*At the time, I just thought I would have to give an interview to the police and that would be it. I didn't think it would go any further but then it went to [my social worker] and then CAMHS and everything like that, it just kept on spreading and at the time, I was just wanting it all to just go away... At that time, you just feel like you regret telling anyone in the first place because it just keeps on getting bigger and bigger. Then just telling the police, you think you would tell the police and then it just all goes away. (Child 6)*

### **Difficult experiences of initial police contact**

Initial police contact can be difficult or distressing. Children and young people, described many small details of the first contact with police that had a significant impact. For example, Child 5 remembers tiny details of an incident that happened over a year ago.

*And then I think [sibling] woke up from the buzzer. 'Cause I remember her waking up and you [mum] having her in your hands when you were in the hallway. (Child 5)*

Three individuals who had provided initial statements to police (or been present when their mothers had done so) described this first meeting with police officers as overwhelming, particularly where it had happened in their home. One child remembered being scared because two big police officers in uniform were in their family's living room late at night. Another described that the normal noises of a busy house (TV switched on, siblings playing computer games and running around) compounded the stress of being asked questions about what had happened and described a difficult interaction where they felt that the police judged the mother, child and household.

One young woman who spoke to the researchers via her mother remembered her first contact with police as a distressing situation where she was on her own without close friends or family and being interviewed by male officers. Although she described the police officers as 'lovely' she would have much preferred to speak to female officers.

### **The number of professionals the child or young person meets**

Children and young people talked about the number of professionals they met as overwhelming. This was particularly true in the first weeks after a disclosure, where professional contact often started with a police visit. All the children and young people gave examples of meeting professionals and not understanding who they were or what their role was. Three gave examples of meeting multiple professionals from the same service (variously social work, police and Women's Aid) and not knowing the difference between the different individuals' roles.

*It just was relentless, people coming to ask questions constantly. (Child 4)*

Some children and young people didn't express distress or major dissatisfaction about not knowing the name or role of all the professionals they met, but for most this was described as frustrating. Those who seemed less bothered were the younger children and they expressed that their parent or carer understood who everyone was and made sure they knew everything they needed to know.

### **Feeling like being 'left hanging': professional contact over the longer term**

In the period after the SCIM, children and young people often felt that they were 'left hanging' or waiting for information, particularly about any ongoing police investigation or prosecution, before being catapulted into the business of court proceedings. Two young people described how they and their parents had tried to get information about what was happening in this period and had been unsuccessful, one because they didn't know who to contact and one who made contact but did not receive a response.

*And since then, which I think has been two months, I haven't heard a word from him. But I think that's because he's been going through the witnesses and the statements. But I think it would have been a helpful thing to tell me, 'by the way, this is still an ongoing thing', because I haven't heard a single thing. (Child 1)*

The times between interactions with professionals were problematic because children and young people rarely felt that they had all the information they needed or wanted about what was happening in the

'background'. This related particularly to news about criminal investigations and referrals to or waiting lists for services and what the next steps would be. The three oldest young people expressed particular frustration with the lack of information – potentially reflecting their growing desire for autonomy and involvement, aligned to their developmental stage. All but one of the children and young people described leaning on their parent or carer to manage information, but at least two young people expressed frustration that their parents were also not given the information they needed to support them. Four of the six interviewees were in positions during this period where contact with the accused was possible and all described feeling that they weren't fully supported to manage this situation.

Two of the children or young people interviewed had been to court and the other four were expecting their case to go to court soon – two had dates and the other two were waiting for the outcome of the criminal investigations. None of the children and young people felt that they had all the information they would have liked about the progress of their case.

*The courts are really bad. The communication from them is zero. (Child 4)*

The younger children relied on their parents and carers to navigate court processes. Older young people were frustrated by the lack of communication and not knowing how to access information.

### **3.2.2 Services not feeling joined up**

While children and young people's face-to-face interactions with professionals were broadly positive, they often did not understand how all of these interactions fitted together and did not perceive professionals as working together in a connected system.

#### **Confusion about professionals and their roles**

All the children and young people mentioned professionals whose role they were not sure of. Often this was a professional that they only saw once or twice – for example one child talked about a 'health man' who visited them in school, and the child wasn't sure why, but knew that the man didn't check any of the other children. Another child, who at the point of evaluation interview had just visited the court for a pre-trial visit, talked about meeting a 'court man' who they thought was going to help them, but the child didn't know what was happening or why they needed another person to help. A third child talked about meeting a woman once a week at their school who was nice, but the child wasn't sure why they had to meet her.

#### **Lack of clarity about what professionals know and share.**

When provided with the necessary information, children and young people displayed sophisticated abilities to understand the different roles that professionals play and how these might affect their interactions. The young person quoted below is comparing the support she received from the police and from her recovery support worker.

*Obviously, their job is to protect me, but I think they protect me in a police manner and not an emotional manner. (Child 1)*

However, children and young people had patchy understanding of whether and how professionals know each other and collaborate or share information. One child talked about there being a Women's Aid worker for their mother and one for themselves but not knowing what these workers told each other. Another young person, who had disclosed abuse in school, said that they didn't know which teachers knew about what had happened and they didn't know how much of the information they had disclosed had been passed on to the police. Another young person referenced multiple police officers that they had met but wasn't sure how they all fitted together and whether they shared information.

*And then my guidance teacher told the deputy head teacher. So, I have no idea what she knows. My deputy head teacher told the first police officer, so I've no idea what he knows. And then the first police officer told the second police officer. But I again spoke to the second police officer. So, I retold the second police officer everything. (Child 1)*

This uncertainty was compounded by the high numbers of professionals that children and young people came into contact with.

*We had police, social work, child protection, GP, because obviously an IRD was raised for her. So, we had the GPs, we had the victim people on the phone to us, Rape Crisis, Sycamore Support, then obviously Sycamore. (Child 4 – via their mother)*

There were examples where information about how services fitted together was shared effectively with children and young people. For example, one young person spoke about how they and their mother were both receiving recovery support and was clear that the workers would not share information with each other unless the young person's worker was worried about something the young person had said – and then the worker would discuss it with the young person first. This clarity enabled clear conversations about confidentiality between the mother and young person. For example, when the mother asked her child's permission to share information with the mother's friend, the child refused permission, and this was respected.

Another young person described meetings every few weeks in school where their social worker, CAMHS worker and education staff met with them and their mother with the specific aim of finding out how they were doing in school. The young person's perception was that these meetings were the only time that these different professionals communicated with each other and the young person thought it was useful for these workers to meet with their mother. Another young person expressed concern about who would get to hear the recording of the SCIM interview and was reassured by their SCIM interviewer that the interview was confidential; it was unclear whether the young person understood that the recording could also be used as evidence in court.

### **Children and young people struggle to access information about what is happening with their court case**

For some children and young people, the lack of contact with professionals and/or lack information about next steps in their case increased their anxiety and confusion. This was particularly true in the period after the SCIM interview, when a case was being investigated or going to court. One young person was aware that people in their life had been interviewed but didn't know who, and didn't know what they were allowed to say to others about the case. Another was waiting to hear about their case going to court and did not know when or how they would hear what was happening. Neither young person knew who would or should be communicating with them.

*[My child]'s angry from the perspective of, they've not spoken to [them] about the charges, and [they] didn't quite understand why [they've] disclosed three years of abuse, and yet only four charges have come out of that. (Child 4 via mother)*

These experiences suggest that children, young people and their families are affected by a failure to explain the parameters around judicial processes, evidential thresholds and how charges are decided upon and progressed in the justice system.

### **3.2.3 Importance of children and young people feeling valued, seen and cared for**

While many of the issues mentioned above require action at the strategic level, children and young people also identified actions at the everyday relational level that can help them feel valued, seen and cared for in a

wider difficult context. Adjustments to the ways that professionals act can have a big impact without significant resource implications.

### **The physical and emotional environment can help children and young people to feel safe and supported**

The physical environment in which interactions take place is important to children and young people. It was notable how often children and young people, unprompted, described the environment when asked about their experiences, or, if prompted, could share a clear memory of where it took place.

One child described being taken to a 'bland' room in the school for a meeting with a police officer and described the 'tick, tick, tick' of the clock. In contrast, the same young person described the room in the Sycamore Centre where they had their SCIM Interview as colourful and remembered a picture behind the interviewer's head that they focused on when being asked difficult questions.

*They had a poster right behind her head, so I was just staring like right through her brain, and I just had [a fidget toy] on my lap and I was just fidgeting around. (Child 1)*

Several children and young people mentioned details of the informality and care reflected in the environment and the ways that they had been treated at the Sycamore Centre that had made an impression on them. These included: being offered a glass of water when they arrived, there being snacks for their parent to eat while they waited, colours, playing hide and seek in all the different rooms before the interview, and comfy sofas. One child mentioned how they got to sit on the big comfy sofa while the interviewer sat on a little chair. Fidget toys were the most commonly mentioned object; children and young people noting their presence in interactions they considered positive and their absence in interactions they considered less positive.

*Yeah, they were very kind and if I didn't want to answer a question or felt uncomfortable answering it then they would give me, like, a glass of water to calm myself. (Child 5)*

### **How professionals communicate can make children and young people feel valued and seen**

Children and young people talked about the details of the ways in which professionals communicated with them. Several noted differences between professionals who they judged were only interested in what had happened to them (related to the disclosure) and those who were interested in them more fully as a person. Others mentioned small personal things that they knew about professionals and appreciated when professionals shared things about their life outside their job; this helped children and young people feel seen and valued beyond a solely transactional relationship related to the abuse. Similarly, two children noted that they found it difficult when professionals launched into asking difficult questions without taking time to build rapport. One offered the following advice for professionals:

*Don't go right into the questions, like, you ask the child if they're comfortable, and if they're okay with you asking them a couple of questions, and everything. (Child 2)*

In addition, all the children and young people who had been interviewed at the Sycamore Centre mentioned the care professionals took to explain about the Sycamore Centre. All said seeing the film of the centre had been useful to help them understand where they were going and what would happen at the SCIM interview.

### **Investing in consistent relationships with children and young people builds trust and safety**

Children and young people appreciated when professionals spent time getting to know them because it made them feel seen, valued and more comfortable to discuss more difficult topics. This time spent getting to know children and young people is cumulative. When asked about the professionals with whom they had the most positive interactions, several children and young people said that they had the best experiences with the people that they saw the most consistently over a longer period, stating that they trusted and felt

more comfortable with professionals they knew better. It is worth noting that this was particularly mentioned in the context of social worker turnover and seeing multiple different people over quite a short period of time.

*She was the best because we saw her the most. (Child 3)*

### **3.3 Concluding thoughts from the experiences of children and young people**

There was much that children and young people found supportive in their interactions with professionals after abuse or maltreatment had been identified. Children and young people identified details of these interactions, including aspects of the environment, that made them feel valued, seen and cared for. Challenges lie, however, in ensuring strong connections between these interactions and across individuals' whole Sycamore Bairns' Hoose journey.

Clarity of communication and effective information-sharing emerged as vital to manage children and young people's expectations and support them to better understand processes, professional roles and professional decision-making. This is particularly important where there are long time periods between children and young people's direct contact with professionals.

## 4. Findings from professionals

The key themes identified by children and young people were also reflected in the interviews with professionals, demonstrating a broadly shared understanding of strengths of the current systems and areas that need development. In particular, while certain aspects of the journey – particularly the SCIM interview and relationships with specific key professionals – were viewed as having improved significantly over recent years, both groups saw a clear need to ‘join the dots’ between these services to ensure a smooth and coherent journey through services and to recovery and justice for the child or young person.

One area where there was tension between the perspectives relates to perspectives of the period immediately after disclosure. While professionals considered this to be the strongest phase of the journey, where agencies mobilise around the interagency referral discussion and response, children and young people described it as a period of intense overwhelm. These can both be true, but we emphasise the importance of prioritising children and young people’s emotional needs in this phase.

In this section we present key learning from professionals under two categories: areas of strength and key areas for development.

### 4.1 Areas of strength

Professionals felt that Sycamore Bairns’ Hoose is led by a committed and active strategic group working closely together to improve children and young people’s experiences with services after they have disclosed harm or abuse. Professionals working directly with children and young people were all clear about their own role and responsibilities in a complex system of services and processes.

There was a clear consensus across all the professionals interviewed that many services for children and young people affected by abuse in Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian have improved significantly in recent years.

#### 4.1.1 The Scottish Child Interview Model

Professionals spoke highly of the implementation of the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) and the improvements it has made for children and young people’s experience of the joint investigative interview. In particular, professionals talked about the SCIM facilitating the slowing down of the process to provide a more trauma-informed approach.

*The old way, we would come in in the morning and be told, right, you’re going to interview Joe Bloggs in an hour, and be handed a piece of paper, and we would read the circumstances which was very small, and we would go to their school, and they would often not know that we were coming. And a teacher would bring them out of class and they would plonk them in a room with us, we’re sitting there with cameras and microphones and obviously we try and make it as child centred as possible, however we are still two strangers and we expect them to speak... whereas now it’s a much slower pace, the child knows why they’re coming here and the purpose of why they’re coming here in advance. (Professional 3)*

Several professionals commented on the benefits of allowing time for SCIM interviewers to effectively plan for the forensic interview, which supports meeting the individual needs of children and young people in a more trauma-informed way. This, alongside children and young people being more informed about the purpose and practice of the JII, enabled an enhanced experience for those being interviewed.

*The SCIM model is about planning. That wasn’t happening prior to the SCIM model. So, you know, about considering every child is unique, planning for that child, planning for the interview, knowing the child before they come for the interview and being more trauma informed. Having a fixed site,*

*having that site ready to welcome the child. Having, you know, the room set up. Hopefully knowing, you know, about the child, about their interests, about things that they don't like. (Professional 17)*

Professionals as well as children and young people mentioned the resources about the Sycamore Centre which are shared in the period between IRD and JII. For example, professionals felt the video and leaflets are useful to help interviewees feel prepared for the JII.

*We've got our wee welcome video actually, which is nice. We obviously send that out to the families in advance. And the welcome leaflet. So, they have that prior knowledge of where they're coming to and obviously the place is really nice up here. (Professional 3)*

It was noted how useful visiting children and young people before the JII was, although it was acknowledged this did not happen consistently. When it did happen, it was seen as useful to ensure the interview was effectively planned to meet the needs of the child or young person being interviewed.

*It doesn't happen very often, but there was a child with expressive speech and language disorder, and we did have to meet her to understand her iPad prior to the SCIM. So, we understood how she used it, what words and phrases were on. Worked with the teacher to say, you need to add potentially bits of information. That was really quite productive and made the interview better for the child. And then some parents say, can you meet my child because they are extremely anxious, they like to know people's faces. (Professional 4)*

For a small number of children and young people, preparation before the JII included visiting the Sycamore Centre.

*There was a case where there was a young person who did have learning difficulties or a diagnosed learning need and myself and my colleague went out to talk to him and his teacher was there, and we assessed that we didn't think he would be able to (do the interview). However, she felt that actually in a different environment, maybe he would. So, we actually arranged for a visit up to the Sycamore Centre and then he came to be interviewed, say, a few weeks later, I think (Professional 10)*

Mirroring children and young people's perceptions, professionals described elements of the SCIM interview itself that they considered particularly helpful for interviewees including: the importance of the interviewee giving ongoing consent to take part, the pacing of the interview, taking time to explain what will happen, regular breaks etc., all of which helped children and young people feel more in control of their situation at a stressful time.

*We totally stress that from the minute that they arrive, even when we start the interview, this is your interview and we're led by you, so if you want to get five minutes in and leave, that's okay. If you want to come back next week... If you want to just even have a look around today, we'll go at your pace. So, we'll never force them to do anything that they don't want to do. (Professional 3)*

While it is important to acknowledge that the Scottish Child Interview Model existed prior to the existence of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose, its ongoing delivery and development remain a critical aspect of the developing Bairns' Hoose site. A number of improvements associated with delivering the SCIM have been directly enabled by Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. These include improved spaces in which to deliver JIIs; new pathways for access to Sycamore Support; and deepening multidisciplinary working, including through co-location of the Edinburgh SCIM team.

#### 4.1.2 The Sycamore Centre space

Another key factor in these improvements is the space in which the joint investigative interviews are conducted.

Almost all professionals viewed the Sycamore Centre as a positive space to interview children – particularly in contrast to the ad hoc spaces where interviews previously took place. While some professionals could identify a small number of JIIs that had taken place outside the Sycamore Centre since it had been operational – for reasons of geography, additional support needs, or when the Sycamore Centre was fully occupied – the clear expectation was that the majority of interviews would take place within the Centre.

*I remember one time [before the Sycamore Centre was opened] going into a school and doing a joint interview and being basically put in a cupboard, and interviewed a child. It was a fairly big cupboard, but it was a messy one. You know, there was no thought put into... this is something potentially the child is going to remember for a very long time, if not the rest of their life. (Professional 15)*

Evidence from our interviews with children and young people confirm this professional's expectation that the environment in which the interview takes place is significant to the child or young person's experience. The Sycamore Centre space was considered calm and welcoming for children, young people and families.

*The environment [at the Sycamore Centre] is just much more calming and welcoming... We've got a much more, kind of, child-centred space where young people can come, which is private and just enables them that time and space and comfort to either access support from Sycamore Support or to take part in a joint interview. (Professional 18)*

#### 4.1.3 Effective multi-agency working

The interviews also presented many positive examples of multi-agency working. Several of these were directly related to IRDs, to the multi-agency SCIM team and to how the SCIM team works with other agencies.

*I think in Edinburgh we've got a very good system from the IRD perspective, we've got that really tight IRD working, so we'll have that discussion when a child has potentially been abused. We'll have that discussion with health and social work. And then make a decision if the child is going to be joint interviewed, and it's always a collective decision. (Professional 22)*

Enhanced communication between professionals appeared to provide the opportunity for professionals to work together to be more child centred in their work practices. The example below demonstrates how good multi-agency working allows for the child or young person's unique needs to be recognised in planning and decision making.

*With the SCIM process, it's been really positive in that we are contacted in (when) the SCIM interview is planned for, we're often asked for feedback about how it would fit for the child, if there is a birthday coming up or there is a particular change in their family time, we would feed that back and that would be considered. (Professional 11)*

Professionals perceived that these changes not only improve the child or young person's interview experience but also have the potential to affect their longer-term justice and child protection experiences.

*I think their experience is better, which hopefully then results in them being able to give, like, a clearer account and then that better informs their safety planning or their planning in terms of social work and assessments, but also in terms of going to court. (Professional 18)*

*Our disclosure rates are higher... and I do think it's because we are making sure that children understand what they're coming to talk to us about and are given the option to say no. (Professional 20)*

#### **4.1.4 Initial development of specialist recovery services for children and young people**

Professionals also noted that, although there are currently gaps in provision, the creation of a specialist support service for children and young people (aged 12+ who have experienced gender-based violence) who have participated in a SCIM is a particularly positive development. Interviewees were keen to extend this service to all children and young people.

*It is early days in terms of them being fully up and running. But the feedback I've had so far is that it's been positive. (Professional 15)*

*I think we're beginning to develop that in terms of recovery, just with Sycamore Support, but I'm very mindful that that's just the beginning, and we need to develop that more, and there are gaps there in terms of third sector services... Part of our plan for this year, in terms of the affiliate fund, is to develop that and work with other third sector services and how we coordinate that. (Professional 18)*

#### **4.1.5 Commitment to ongoing learning and development**

Finally, interviewees showed a commitment to ongoing learning and development. This is demonstrated not only by the partnership with University of Edinburgh and the evaluation but also by work to ensure staff have the support they need to fulfil their roles in the longer term.

*That's something that's a bit new for this year, that sort of recognising the impact, if you're trying to hold the space for children and their parents, and you're trying to offer that relationship-based practice, and you're trying to contain people through really difficult experiences, you need to be able to contain the staff too. So, we've got funding to look at how we can do that for the whole Partnership, as well, this year. (Professional 20)*

## **4.2 Areas for development**

Professionals also identified a number of areas as needing focus and action.

### **4.2.1 Maintaining a consistent integrated service whilst remaining responsive to the child or young person's individual needs**

When interviewees were asked to describe a child or young person's journey through services, the most common response was that every journey is completely different. This was viewed as positive, in terms of being flexible to the needs of each child or young person and the context of each case. However, participants also suggested there are challenges delivering a consistent service while remaining able to respond flexibly to individual context. Several ideas arose about how to provide a consistent response for children; these are discussed below.

### The need for a consistent person to provide the child or young person with support and information

Most professionals were confident in their own engagement with children, young people and families in their specific part of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose journey. They were, however, concerned about whether individuals moving through Sycamore Bairns' Hoose have someone with whom they have a consistent relationship, providing sustained support and updates throughout their entire justice and recovery journey.

Professionals recognised that children, young people and their families engage with a high number of services and yet often do not have the information they need to help them make decisions and understand what is happening to their case over time.

*It's a lot of different services, it's a lot of phone calls, it's a lot of talking, it's a lot of giving information, it's a lot of pouring salt in the freshly opened wound and nothing is happening, and they don't know where to go. There may be a leaflet, there may be a crime number on the card and a number you can call but that's about it. (Professional 29)*

It was noted that some children and young people have no sustained supportive professional relationships and don't know who they can turn to.

*I know we can say, okay, you can talk to your GP or your women's aid worker, but some people have no one. So where do these people get signposted to? (Professional 4)*

Having a single point of contact to help them navigate the complex systems they encounter was identified as a change that would make a significant improvement to children, young people and their families' experiences.

*I would hope if that is one place for families to go that they would get all the information in one place that they need and all the support in one place. And I think this is where families struggle because they have to navigate so many different professionals, especially in the initial period after maybe a disclosure was made. I think having it all in one place or having one place where they can get the information from all aspects that follows a disclosure. (Professional 8)*

Professionals interviewed made a distinction between two important and necessary functions: a consistent supportive relationship through the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose journey and the person who holds the information about that individual's journey. Participants noted that these two functions could be fulfilled by one person or could, to some extent, be separated.

Where a child or young person has an allocated social worker, there is an assumption that the social worker will fulfil both functions. Yet this may not always be the case, as suggested below.

*From a social work perspective, it depends if the child is allocated or not. So if they're already allocated to a social worker, then once the SCIM is done, their allocated social worker has feedback about what was in the SCIM, and then they would continue their work, and they would already have a child's plan, and they would incorporate that into work they're already doing. (Professional 20)*

Several participants questioned whether social workers had capacity to fulfil this role within their existing workloads.

There was even less clarity where the child or young person does not have an allocated social worker, with one member of staff expressing an expectation that there must be procedures in place for families to get information but noting that providing a phone number isn't enough if there is no relationship in place.

*Once that SCIM process ends and the bit of a follow-up is done with duty or whatever, that case may be then closed to social work and there may be an agreement that whatever safety plans are in place, is in place during the police investigation. But that can obviously be an extremely long time and that family is just, I don't know, my view is just left. I mean I'm sure they get updates, I'm sure they've got numbers that they can phone to try and get updates but it's such a long process, I think for them it feels like nothing is really happening for such a long time and they are just left to manage that. (Professional 1)*

Several participants mentioned the future possibility of a Bairns' Hoose co-ordinator who might fulfil both functions – holding relevant information and maintaining the supportive relationship – but there was some scepticism about whether one person would have capacity to build relationships with all of the children and young people traveling through Sycamore Bairns' Hoose.

Other participants suggested that the person who provides sustained support could be an individual who is not directly connected to Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. This could be a professional who was providing support to the child or young person since before their disclosure (such as a guidance teacher or CAMHS worker) or could be a more informal relationship (such as a family member or youth worker). However, to fulfil this role, the person would need time to build a positive relationship, knowledge about Sycamore Bairns' Hoose, and routes to access information about or on behalf of the child or young person.

It was noted that children and young people who have more supportive relationships – and particularly supportive parents – in their life are at an advantage as they travel through services in Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. These relationships provide children and young people with additional support to navigate services and access information. Professionals recognise that where parents are not receiving adequate support this impacts the child.

*[The parents] might get some support and then suddenly everything falls away and then the same, maybe the cycle continues. Then they get a whole bunch of input again and then someone might say, well, if you don't change, we are going to take your child away. (Professional 5)*

Participants emphasised the need to provide sustained support to parents and carers so that they can better support their children.

### **Ensuring consistent preparation and follow up before and after major events in the child or young person's journey**

Professionals identified that having flexibility to meet individual needs can at times result in inconsistent services for children, young people and families. One area in which this inconsistency shows up is in preparation for key events along the child or young person's journey including JIIs, forensic medical examinations and court appearances.

While all professionals involved in JIIs saw benefit in all children and young people meeting SCIM interviewers before the interview, this tended to happen inconsistently. It was perceived that a decision might be made to undertake a pre-SCIM visit at IRD because there was an identified concern about the child or young person's ability to participate in the JII, or it might be made on an ad hoc basis based on capacity and judgement of the interviewers involved.

*So, there's different reasons why we might meet them, and who might do that. So sometimes a child will come to Sycamore, not having previously met a social worker or a police officer before, and sometimes they might have met a social worker, that is or is not their usual social worker, and then they're a police officer and a social worker from SCIM, and then come to Sycamore. (Professional 20)*

*Whenever we do a pre-SCIM visit, then I suppose we have more control over that, I guess. Otherwise, it would be maybe the headteacher or something telling them, or a parent, but I guess you have to trust that they're given the right information and why they are coming to the SCIM. Which I think has actually got better as the SCIM has been around more. But I think when we do it, then, yeah, I guess, we're able to answer. Say, if we're speaking to a parent or something, often the parents may have anxieties, and then you're able to reassure them and answer any questions they have. And the same if you go to visit the child. Because I think even if you're having a conversation with the phone, the different perceptions children and parents can have over when you say it will be videoed, and actually what people hear because there's so much going on at the time. (Professional 10)*

Interviewees expressed concern about professionals from one service informing children, young people and families about an event that would be carried out by a different service. While it was understood that this is sometimes necessary and appropriate – such as where a trusted guidance teacher helps a young person prepare for a JII, or where a social worker informs a family of the need for a medical examination – this can be another site of inconsistency, especially when it takes place in a context that is already emotionally overwhelming.

There was a lack of clarity about when and how decisions were made about some of those elements of the child or young person's journey that are not statutorily prescribed. For example, several professionals (who were involved in JIIs) were not clear about how decisions were made about who should follow up with children and young people after the JII and how they should do it. There was also confusion about how follow-up would occur if the child or young person was undecided about whether they wanted to submit a referral to Sycamore Support. For example, one professional suggested that the decision about follow-up would be made at the IRD while another stated that they tended to contact children and young people because they weren't sure who else would but didn't think that this was necessarily part of their role.

Who is responsible for follow-up is particularly unclear where the child or young person does not have an allocated social worker. Most interviewees assumed that where a child or young person had an allocated social worker, the social worker would follow up after the interview, medical or court appearance. Participants shared multiple examples of where a lack of clarity about roles around communication had resulted in children, young people and their families not having vital information. For example, one social worker described how a young person had not been informed that their court date had been postponed.

#### **4.2.2 Improving Bairns' Hoose multidisciplinary working**

Bairns' Hoose is a multi-agency approach aimed at improving coordination and responses to children and young people affected by abuse. While current multi-agency working was considered a strength, professionals identified some for improvement.

##### **Improve information sharing**

Evidence from the evaluation highlights that professionals, like children and young people, do not always have all the information they need to support the child or young person. This can be frustrating as

professionals recognise how this affects the quality of their own work and can see the impact this may have on families.

*Nobody's made contact with that family for such a long time and you're phoning out of the blue saying, 'I need to get this information from you'. And they're like, 'what the... where's it sitting at?' 'Sorry, I don't really know, just been told that I need to get this done for next week, or whenever it is'. So that's frustrating. (Professional 3)*

In addition, professionals aren't always sure who they can share information with about a child or young person. Sharing information within and between different systems (education, justice, health, etc) is difficult and can create barriers to supporting children and young people effectively because information can be lost or not shared consistently.

*Like, education systems, we can't share information through systems, we can't share through health systems. That is not going to change, that is just how it is. Those systems can sometimes be lost, or we forget to update education, for example, they feel a bit left out, all those sorts of things. (Professional 4)*

In addition, professionals are sometimes unaware when and how they can share information.

*I think sometimes statutory services, and I'm not just saying about this part of the service but sometimes it's like, can we share that information [with a Third Sector organisation] ... I don't know, if they think we're not confidential enough but it varies. Saying that, there are people who will phone us up from social work all the time going, here we go, we've got this for you, we've got that for you... and in the NHS, we've got a full data sharing agreement in place because we've had to go through all of that because we needed everybody's figures. So, it is all possible. (Professional 28)*

Formal information-sharing agreements between agencies would support clear protocols for staff to follow.

### **Linking Sycamore Bairns' Hoose with the wider service landscape**

Children and young people live in wider contexts that can be supportive, challenging or, most realistically, a combination of both. Not only is each child or young person's journey through Sycamore Bairns' Hoose unique, their journey with their wider life (family, community, services etc) is unique too. Professionals understand that any single incident of abuse or maltreatment will be part of a bigger and interconnected story. Yet professionals will often only see their part of child or young person's story, which has implications for the service they receive. Professionals recognising the wider service landscape beyond their own single agency was suggested as a way to improve multidisciplinary practice within the Bairns' Hoose.

*Something that we're really keen to promote is actually rather than the child's journey through the Bairns' Hoose, like the system around the child fitting in around the child's journey from the Bairns' Hoose, we're really keen that actually the child's journey through the Bairns' Hoose sits within part of their wider system... And the supports that were before and that were after. And it needs to be very much joined up. (Professional 21)*

Participants recognised that joining up services to improve the experience for children and young people will support children and young people's justice and recovery journeys in the longer term.

Relatedly, participants highlighted tensions within the existing systems that do not support fully recognising what occurs in the wider world for children and young people. For example, the JII tends to relate to a single

incident or situation, suggesting that in complex cases the existing systems and processes might not fully recognise or respond to the child or young person's wider life circumstances.

*The benefit of the SCIM is that sometimes information can obviously go towards a Children's Hearing and evidence about that. But there are some cases that are so complex that it's, like, well, even if they do disclose, it's not really the main issue at all, they need a far wider social work assessment and they need ongoing support. (Professional 10)*

Similarly, it was noted that some children and young people may move through the current child protection system multiple times and may be well known to existing services.

*It is not uncommon for me to look on the IRD and go, oh, I know that patient. I would say that happens maybe... I don't know, 10, 20 times a year in East Lothian. That is East Lothian, small area, so they are the ones that I would know. Then the repeat ones... we get lots of children who come through again and again through the IRDs that you are seeing the same names again and again. Professional 5)*

The implications for Sycamore Bairns' Hoose of having a child or young person referred to an IRD multiple times has not yet been fully explored. Yet, participants noted the importance of careful consideration of how Sycamore Bairns' Hoose interacts with the wider support systems in place for the child or young person, particularly once social work support has concluded, or if the child or young person has no allocated social worker.

*I think a lot of the IRDs are closed and then there is nothing, it is just back, oh, education will monitor, or you will have a child planning meeting, but nobody goes to the child planning meeting. Once social work has withdrawn actually all it is the parents and the school sitting in a room. (Professional 5)*

Professionals recognised the importance of the child, young person or family receiving support that responds to needs beyond the incident that forms the focus of the JII. Where practical support to meet a more holistic set of priorities can be provided, it can help a professional to build trust and rapport with the children, young person, or family. Similarly, professionals see value in opportunities to connect with children and young people in more informal contexts where the focus does not need to be on the abuse or maltreatment.

*Sometimes as well, [what helps is] just doing things, nice things, working on their happiness, going for a coffee, not focusing on the crime, or just a general life chitchat. (Professional 29)*

Several participants from statutory agencies suggested that third sector organisations may have more opportunity to focus on relationship building. However, it was noted that their ability to refer to relevant services – particularly those in the third sector – depended on the personal knowledge and relationships of individual professionals. Professionals also noted the need for a systematic assessment of the gaps in current services – for example, the current lack of recovery services for children under 12.

Multiple professionals emphasised the importance of children and young people's existing support networks. These can include family and peers, trusted professionals such as a guidance teacher with whom they have a strong relationship, or more informal relationships such as colleagues from a part-time job or a sports coach.

### 4.2.3 Developing strategic and operational connections

This section examines views on the strategic development and implementation of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose vision and the responsibility to deliver the National Bairn Hoose standards (2023) as an Affiliate partner to the Scottish Government. Currently there is a small committed strategic group which is making both strategic and operational decisions about the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. The interviews with professionals highlighted that there are gaps in the membership of this group which affect local perceptions of the Bairns' Hoose as a collective vision. This has a knock-on effect on how professionals connect to and understand the overall collective vision for Bairns' Hoose and their role within the system. This disconnect, in turn, affects children and young people's experience of services not being joined up.

The sections below identify areas where there is particular concern about an existing disconnect with Sycamore Bairns' Hoose.

#### Education

It was widely recognised that education is the service that often has the strongest existing professional relationships with children and young people and where they spend the most time. Education professionals feel that they often shoulder a significant amount of the responsibility to provide day-to-day support for children and young people and that what is going on in a child or young person's life affects how they experience education. Professionals from other services noted the importance of engaging with school staff to gather information about a child or young person's context and communication needs. Despite this, education professionals are not always integrated into case management processes or represented in multi-agency decision making fora.

*Unfortunately, it's 99 per cent of it comes back to us and said, well, 'you've got the relationship with the parent, so can you speak to the parent or have you told the parent that you're phoning in, or could you gather more information or can you speak to the child?' So, it seems a bit unbalanced that we're asked to do a lot of the work, but we're not at the table. (Professional 11)*

Several interviewees noted that in some local authorities education is a required partner in the IRD process, but this was not the case in Edinburgh, Midlothian or East Lothian. Midlothian and East Lothian do include a representative from education in the process of reviewing IRDs before they are closed; this was also the case in Edinburgh before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the individual left the post and was not replaced. Several reasons were given for this omission, including the lack of capacity within education, particularly during the school day or in holiday periods. Professionals also raised the concern that including a fourth agency would slow the IRD timescale. However, there was a clear consensus that it would be beneficial to include education within the IRD process.

It was also noted that, for health and police, processes for sharing information consistently with education are not clear. It was not clear whether including education in the IRD would resolve this issue.

*I feel like that is a thought of how things could be slightly different. I suppose joined up because systems, like, education systems, we can't share information through systems, we can't share through health systems. That is not going to change, that is just how it is. Those systems can sometimes be lost, or we forget to update education, for example, they feel a bit left out, all those sorts of things. I think a wee bit more of consistency in how we follow things up. (Professional 4)*

Education professionals, and others, recognised the need for clearer operational and information-sharing processes to ensure that education staff are fully updated and informed about a case to enable the school to provide the best support for the child or young person. This is true for all cases, but particularly where the disclosure originated in school.

Participants noted a particular issue that occurs where the incident involves children and young people who are at the same school (so called 'peer-on-peer abuse'). Children and young people identified that peer relationships can be difficult, both where the alleged perpetrator of the abuse is another young person in the same school and also where other children become aware of the child or young person's situation. Education professionals find these situations particularly challenging as they have a responsibility to support all the children or young people involved. They expressed appreciation for social work and health colleagues who had supported education in these situations but also suggested that solutions might be found earlier if they were involved at IRD stage.

### **Recovery and advocacy partners**

Almost all interviewees talked about the importance of ensuring that the recovery services at the Sycamore Centre are accessible for all children and young people who travel through the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. Sycamore Support provided through STAR is viewed as a very positive development. Yet there is a clear acknowledgement that the current support offer does not currently meet the recovery needs of all children and young people who may require it.

The evaluation identified a number of other services that currently provide support to children and young people after abuse and maltreatment – including the Meadows Service and multiple third sector organisations – which are not currently formally included in the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose support offer. Similarly, strong advocacy services exist in the localities covered by Sycamore Bairns' Hoose – including the Cairn Service (for young people involved in police investigations) and Who Cares? Scotland – which are also not currently integrated into the Bairns' Hoose support offer.

Several participants said that involving recovery and advocacy partners (both third sector and CAMHS) at the strategic level of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose was desirable – as a means of ensuring that recovery support is given the same level of priority as other 'rooms' within the Bairns' Hoose and different parts of the child's journey to justice and recovery. Their involvement in strategic decision-making would go some way to addressing a lack of shared understanding about how CAMHS, Sycamore Support and other recovery and advocacy support services can best fit together to provide seamless, flexible and accessible support to children and young people.

### **Justice**

Court and justice processes were noted to be the parts of the system (and the child or young person's journey) that other professionals knew least about and felt most dislocated from. Many interviewees recognised that this feeling may be shared by children and young people, and expressed frustration that they didn't know how to get information to update children, young people and their families about justice processes. Participants considered it vital that SCRA, COPFS (including Victim Information and Advice - VIA) and SCTS are brought into the strategic group in order to ensure processes are in place to address these gaps as the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose implementation continues.

## **4.3 Concluding thoughts from interviews with professionals**

Professionals identified several key factors which are going well in the development of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. Some of these, including the SCIM and multi-agency working around the IRD, predate Bairns' Hoose but undoubtedly provide a good foundation for its development. More specific Bairns' Hoose developments identified include the use of the new space, addition of specialist recovery support for over 12s from STAR, and an ongoing culture of learning and development. While these transformations were perceived positively, other necessary changes were identified to focus the development of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose to meet the national Bairns' Hoose standards. A single point of contact to provide both ongoing relational

support and case coordination was recognised as necessary to improve children and young people's safety, justice and recovery journeys after abuse and maltreatment.

Further, interviewees said that professional responses to children and young people's needs must be systemic and holistic, recognising both the complexity of the needs and the wider service landscape which children and young people are required to navigate. Finally, there was a clear appetite to create a collective vision and shared action plan for moving the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose forward. The critical roles of education, justice, advocacy and recovery partners in responding to children and young people's needs after abuse or maltreatment were emphasised. An expanded partnership for transformational change is vital.

## 5. Conclusion: Joining the dots

This section concludes the report by identifying key learning points drawn from our interviews with children, young people and professionals. We present these points to inform reflection and discussion to support the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose Partnership fulfil our responsibility to work towards meeting the national Bairns' Hoose standards.

1. Within the unavoidably difficult context of dealing with the aftermath of abuse and maltreatment, all the children and young people we interviewed had had positive individual experiences with professionals who had helped and supported them. However, they did not experience these varied interactions with professionals as being joined up. Children and young people particularly wanted to see changes to their experiences of education and justice systems.
2. Children and young people wanted improved communication and information about what is happening to them and their case. Professionals acknowledged that this is a weakness in current practice, however, they often do not have access to information across all services to update children and young people. There is not always clarity about who is responsible for providing updates to children, young people and their families.
3. Most children and young people spoke about problematic impacts of the timing and pacing of their Sycamore Bairns' Hoose journey. The initial period, immediately after identification of abuse or maltreatment, was often described as overwhelming, involving multiple contacts from a variety of professionals not known to the child or young person. This was often followed by a period of less professional contact, characterised by uncertainty and a lack of information about their case, which made them feel they were left hanging.
4. Children and young people identified actions at the everyday relational level that could help them to feel valued, seen and cared for. These ways of working by professionals, and environments that support these ways of working, could have a big impact without necessarily significant resource implications.
5. Professionals across all agencies recognised that good work is being done and progress made to support children and young people. They also acknowledged that the system often lets children and young people down. Areas of most concern included: lack of consistency of communicating with children, young people and families; failure to keep children and young people informed of key decisions affecting them; the length of time the court processes take; timely recovery services not being available for all; lack of clarity about how decisions are made and by whom; and, finally, the particular challenges experienced by children and young people who do not have an allocated social worker.
6. There are perceived gaps in services for children and young people within the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose model. Simultaneously, the evaluation identified that there are relevant services working successfully with children and young people affected by abuse and maltreatment which are not currently operating under the Bairns' Hoose umbrella. Bringing these services into the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose collective would plug some of the gaps and help identify where resources might be most effectively targeted.

7. The evaluation identified no clear collective understanding or vision of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose model locally. Many professionals working with children and young people affected by abuse and maltreatment do not currently see themselves as part of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. Operational and third sector professionals, in particular, had a desire to engage in Sycamore Bairns' Hoose but were not sure of their place in it and how to become part of the drive to improve services for children and young people who have experienced abuse or maltreatment. Further, professionals who have a place in this approach need training and networking opportunities so as to know and understand each other's roles and processes.
8. We acknowledge that the majority of children and young people we interviewed had not yet been through the justice system. We also note the practical challenges we had which made it difficult to speak to professionals working in the Courts and the Children's Hearing systems. Further research is needed to explore the challenges and opportunities available to improve children and young people's justice experiences.

The above learning points come directly from data collected for this evaluation. The list was shared and discussed with 40 professionals at a dissemination workshop, Making Sense of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose, who identified three additional learning points that are shared below. A full account of this event can be found in the companion briefing paper to this report at: <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/research/research-project/bairns-hoose-barnahus-evaluation-scotland>

9. Workshop participants recognised the challenge for all professionals working in this field and the high risks of burnout and vicarious trauma. As such they emphasised the need to prioritise access to high quality and appropriate support for staff across the workforce.
10. Workshop participants identified gaps in services supporting children and their families, particularly in the fields of justice, advocacy and recovery. It is considered vital to identify key risks within the Bairns' Hoose system resulting from these gaps and to develop clear processes to manage and escalate these risks strategically. In particular, the importance of new and sustained funding to assess and manage these risks was emphasised.
11. Given the evidence in this report, workshop participants identified an essential need for children and their families to have a single point of contact through their Bairns' Hoose journey. It is envisaged that this single point of contact will provide a consistent relationship to help them navigate the multiple agencies they will encounter and provide access to understandable, timely information.

Workshop participants undertook a ranking exercise related to the 11 learning points above. The clear top 3 learning points recommended for priority action are:

**First priority:** development of a single point of contact point of contact for children, young people and their families (learning point 11).

**Second priority:** improved communication with children, young people and families is required (learning point 2).

**Third priority:** identifying current services and gaps in provision, inviting a wider range of existing services into the Bairns' Hoose collective while recognising that they need capacity and resources to undertake this additional work (learning point 6).

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## Appendix 1: Methodology

### Ethical approval

This evaluation sits within a number of Bairns Hoose evaluation projects being undertaken by University of Edinburgh which have ethical approval (level 3) from the University of Edinburgh School of Social and Political Science ethics panel. An amendment was made and approved to this overall Bairns' Hoose ethics submission to widen its scope to include the evaluation of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. A data management plan was also agreed as part of this application.

The University of Edinburgh agreed a data sharing agreement with City of Edinburgh Council within a signed Collaborative Agreement.

Caldicott ethical approval was granted by NHS Lothian, with the Senior Research Fellow – Christina McMellon – being granted an honorary contract with NHS Lothian.

### Interviews with children and young people

The evaluation design is predicated upon an ethical imperative to ensure that children and young people's experiences are at the centre of the Bairns' Hoose model and the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose development. However, in the context of Bairns' Hoose, the nature of children and young people's experiences are such that sharing them is likely to be difficult and the children and young people may be vulnerable to re-traumatisation.

Recruitment was conducted using a protocol developed with the Sycamore Strategic Group to ensure adherence to the data sharing agreement. Children and young people were chosen to invite to interview to represent as wide a set of experiences, identities and localities as possible.

The researcher spoke to either the social worker, parent/carer or young person themselves (if 16 or over) to complete a pre-interview assessment that included identifying ways to ensure that the interview would be as safe and comfortable as possible for the child or young person.

The interview approach and questions were piloted and adapted with four young people from Children First's North Strathclyde Bairns' Hoose Changemakers.<sup>9</sup>

The interviews took place at a venue identified with the child or young person. For many young people this was in their home. One young person requested to come to the university as a neutral space. Children & young people could opt to have an adult of their choice with them (or nearby) if they prefer and this sometimes influenced the space used.

One young person was keen to contribute to the evaluation but did not want to speak to the researcher. In discussion with the university ethics committee and members of the Sycamore Strategic Group the research team agreed to share questions with the young person's mother who then discussed them with their child and shared the responses in a conversation with the researcher.

The researcher used a pre-interview checklist to remind the participant of key points from the consent form and offered a space for any questions or comments.

The interview uses a visual approach to enable the participant to map their journey through interactions with different agencies. It focuses on the time-period after abuse or harm has been identified.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.childrenfirst.org.uk/campaigns/bairns-hoose/changemakers/>

The interview schedule includes four sets of questions (although in reality these are not always distinct):

1. The different people the child/young person met and the experience of these meetings
2. The order that they met people in and how long it took between meetings
3. What happened – and didn't happen - in between meetings
4. Final thoughts about things we could do to improve things for other children and young people

The participant was given a £20 gift voucher in recognition of their time and effort in participating in the interview.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a university approved transcription service. A framework analysis was conducted to identify children and young people's experiences at different stages in their Bairns' Hoose journeys. The research team identified key themes emerging from the interviews and worked closely with a graphic designer to create three composite visual case studies. All the individual scenarios included in the case studies are drawn directly from at least one of the interviews, although details have been changed to maintain anonymity. Finally, the case studies were sense-checked in a workshop with two of the young people interviewed.

### **Interviews with professional**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals either online or in person.

Professionals were suggested by members of the Sycamore Strategic Group and chosen to represent the full range of roles, services and localities. A participant information sheet and consent form were forwarded to interviewees with their invitation to interview.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a university approved transcription service.

The interviews were coded on NVivo using a thematic analysis approach and were sense-checked with the wider research team and Sycamore Strategic Group.