

Making Sense of Sycamore Bairns Hoose Event

Briefing of Knowledge Exchange Event, 17th of September 2025.

Introduction

From January 2025 – March 2026, the Bairns' Hoose evaluation team based at the University of Edinburgh is leading a formative evaluation of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose the covers Edinburgh, Midlothian and East Lothian¹.

The *Making Sense of Sycamore Bairns Hoose* event, held on September 17th 2025, was an opportunity to share and reflect upon emerging findings from the first phase of the evaluation.

Forty-six professionals from local and regional public and third sector organisations working within or alongside the Sycamore Bairns Hoose participated in the event. This briefing paper highlights the rich discussion that occurs when such a wide group of committed individuals are afforded facilitated space to reflect together on how to improve systems and services for children and young people after abuse has been identified. This briefing paper also demonstrates how discussion and feedback from the event has influenced the ongoing evaluation. A report of the findings of the first phase of the Sycamore Bairns Hoose evaluation can be found here: [Joining the Dots: Sycamore Bairns' Hoose Evaluation](#) (November 2025).

Setting the Scene

1.1 Background to Sycamore Bairns Hoose formative evaluation

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

¹ For more information about Scottish Government's roll-out of the Bairns' Hoose model: <https://www.bairnshoosescotland.com/about-bairns-hoose/establishing-bairns-hoose-in-scotland/>

For more information about University of Edinburgh's Bairns' Hoose evaluation programme: [Bairns' Hoose \(Barnahus\) Evaluation - Scotland | School of Social and Political Science](#)

- 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 services 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 has been identified.

1.2 Partners, structure and aims for the day

Making Sense of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose was a collaborative knowledge exchange event organised by the University of Edinburgh in partnership with Police Scotland, Edinburgh City Council, NHS Lothian, East Lothian Council, Midlothian Council and the University of Bedfordshire. Those who took part in the day came from a wide variety of agencies, including professionals working within the Sycamore Bairns Hoose at operational level, and those involved in the Sycamore Bairns Hoose strategic oversight group.

The aim of the day was to share and reflect upon findings from phase one of the evaluation and consider next steps for both the evaluation and the development of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose. This was achieved through a series of collaborative activities to engage with the research findings and generate discussion on the issues raised. A second key aim of this event was to bring together the multi-disciplinary group of people working for the development of the Sycamore Bairns Hoose, to create an opportunity for conversations and developing connections.

A Scottish-based poetry artist, Craig Houston, read emotive poetry on children and young people's experiences of the care and justice system and created "How Can We" a bespoke poem on the key themes and discussion points from throughout the day, which is included at the end of this briefing.

2. Presentations

2.1 Standing still or moving forward - the evolution of children's services to meet children's needs - Professor John Devaney

A keynote presentation was delivered by Professor John Devaney, based at the University of Edinburgh as Dean and Chair of the School of Social and Political Science. The presentation focused on transformational change, reflecting that meaningful change is not achieved through isolated adjustments or surface-level reforms but through a deeper process of rebuilding trust, structures, and shared purpose across agencies. A system is more than the sum of its parts and the integration of services, relationships, and shared values is central to achieving lasting improvement in outcomes for children, young people and their families.

2.2 The Sycamore Bairns Hoose evaluation (phase one)- Dr. Christina McMellon

Dr. Christina McMellon delivered a presentation to participants which outlined the approach the research design and key findings of the first phase of the Sycamore Bairns Hoose evaluation.

The full report upon which the presentation was based can be found here: [Joining the Dots: Sycamore Bairns' Hoose Evaluation](#)

3. Activities

3.1 Collaborative Activity 1: Sense checking the current system

This activity presented participants with a draft diagram of the current system of services for children and young people in Edinburgh, Midlothian or East Lothian, after abuse or maltreatment has been identified, which was developed using the data collected during the phase one research activities.

Key questions that participants discussed in this collaborative activity:

Is this your understanding of how the current system is set up?

Have we missed anything?

Where are the gaps in services or provision in your area?

Summary of findings

The system map that was used in collaborative activity one was a linear, simplified version of the current system. The knowledge gained from professionals at the event demonstrated that the system map needs to be more complex and nuanced if it is to accurately reflect the reality. In particular, the system is not linear. For example, children and young people may exit at different points or face a decision not to proceed, while others re-enter after further allegations.

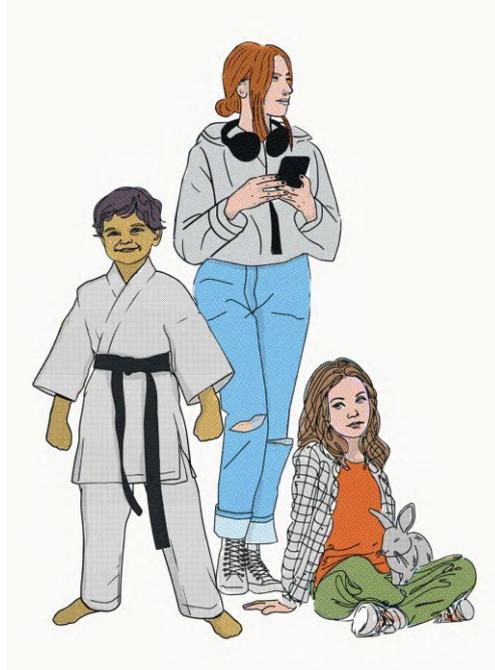
Specific points that participants suggested that the research team need to consider:

- Safety planning for children and young people who access Sycamore Bairns Hoose is a continuous process that often begins before the Inter-agency Referral Discussion (IRD) and is formalised at the IRD. The safety plan is multiagency and continues through the child protection and justice process, ensuring ongoing support and safety for each child.
- The system map needs to more clearly express how a child or young person's journey may involve criminal court or children's hearings processes, the different purposes of these and how they may affect the child or young person at different points.
- Representing the reality and impact of time delays on wider service delivery and processes is challenging but important.
- While the formal Sycamore support service is currently only open to young people aged 12+ there are multiple other sources of support and advocacy that may be involved before, during and after their Bairns' Hoose journey.
- Not all IRDs use the electronic system known as 'E-IRDs'; for example, Midlothian Council can conduct IRD's by phone. In addition, children who witness abuse or violence may not always have an IRD, depending on circumstances. The diagram needs to acknowledge that not all children and young people will go through the system in the same way.

Next steps from this activity:

The Bairns' Hoose evaluation research team are now working on an updated version of the diagram to represent the nuance and complexity of the current system as discussed at the event. We will hold a workshop in early 2026 for professionals to provide feedback and discuss this new diagram.

3.2 Collaborative Activity 2: Darota, Eve and Malik - Children and young people's journeys through services after identification of abuse



The second collaborative activity was to look at, reflect on and discuss the composite case studies of children and young people's journeys through Sycamore Bairn's Hoose, which were developed from creative interviews with children and young people. Each case study is comprised of multiple children and young people's accounts to preserve and protect anonymity.

Group members were presented with the journeys of Dorota, Eve and Malik, and were encouraged by group facilitators to reflect on their reactions to the case studies, and the issues raised by the case studies for the Sycamore Bairns Hoose.

Summary of findings

Participants noted that all three characters in the case studies had broadly positive experiences of the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) and the design of the Sycamore Centre. It was positively noted that this reflects where the Bairns' Hoose resources have so far been directed and indicates a need to give the same attention and resources to other parts of the system.

Participants expressed emotional responses including frustration, disappointment, shock and confusion in response to the gaps, barriers, and inconsistencies that children and young people still experience within the wider system. Participants acknowledged how these emotional responses stemmed not only from observing the experiences of children and young people but also from their own challenges working within multi-agency contexts. Through the composite case studies, professionals discussed how the system can unintentionally compound trauma or confusion for children, young people and families. The narratives highlighted the real-life impact of decisions, communication styles, and inter-agency coordination on children's sense of safety and agency.

Children, young people and their families' access to information emerged as a key discussion point. Professionals recognised that while information sharing is essential, it currently remains largely adult-driven, and the case studies prompted reflection on how to improve transparency and ensure that children have meaningful access to knowledge about decisions affecting them. This aligned closely with professionals' desire to strengthen participatory practice and uphold children's rights.

Professionals noted a lack of control and agency for children and young people who are going through the current system, where many different professionals are involved, and it is often not clear to children and young people why. One professional reflected that the activity was

“A good reminder that sometimes we think we are doing the right thing, but we don't know how children experience this.”

The composite cases also highlighted the multiple relationships between professionals and children, young people, and their families. Professionals discussed how navigating these complex networks requires clarity, trust, and shared understanding across agencies. However, challenges in communication between professionals were frequently raised. The discussions on the composite case studies acknowledged that while collaboration is improving through the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose model, systemic silos, differing professional cultures and limited resources can still hinder effective partnership working.

Another central theme raised by the case studies was how the Sycamore Bairns Hoose model fits into the wider service, policy and legislative landscape. Professionals described a “messy picture” of this, both from the child's perspective and their own. Integrating the Sycamore Bairns Hoose with national frameworks, legal processes, and statutory responsibilities can create confusion about roles, accountability, and decision-making. This complexity sometimes means that processes rather than relationships are prioritised within the current system and model.

Next steps from this activity:

The three composite case studies are included in the evaluation report and will also be published as a standalone resource to support reflection on children and young people's experiences. The Bairns' Hoose evaluation researchers will continue to use this resource to inform applied research methods and practice in the ongoing Sycamore Bairns Hoose evaluation.

3.3 Collaborative activity 3: Exploring the domino effect

The aim of this activity was to support professionals to identify the strategic and practice changes that are necessary to bring about the changes that they want to see for children and young people. After working through a task designed to make these connections, each group was asked to identify the two most important things they felt that professionals need to do differently in their practice that would improve experiences for children and young people accessing the Sycamore Bairns Hoose.

Participants were then invited to read the key learning points from the draft evaluation report and consider whether their group's identified changes were included in the learning points or whether a new learning point needed to be added. This activity provided the responses for the final prioritisation task below.

4. Next steps: Prioritising Action for Sycamore Bairns Hoose

The final activity of the day was for participants to prioritise the learning points that they felt were most important. Each workshop participant was given 5 votes (in the form of sticky dots) that they could split as they wished across the learning points.

The Sycamore Bairns Hoose Strategic group will use these 'key learning points' as priorities to inform the next stages of development for the Bairns Hoose model being developed.

Key Learning Point	Number of votes
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.	49 votes
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 – and professionals need to know the system and the services out there.	22.5 votes
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.	17 votes
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.	15.5 votes
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 votes
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.	9 votes

Further research is needed to explore the challenges and opportunities available to improve children and young people’s justice experiences.	
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.	7 votes
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.	6 votes
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.	5 votes
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.	3 votes
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.	1 vote

5. Conclusion

Making Sense of Sycamore Bairns' Hoose ensured a collaborative approach to moving forward through sense-checking emerging findings with evaluation participants and engaging with people who hadn't previously been involved in either the evaluation or, indeed, Sycamore Bairns' Hoose.

Feedback from the event suggested that participants valued the space to reflect with multiagency colleagues who they might not have met before about how to improve services for children, young people and families after abuse has been identified. Participants particularly appreciated the creative approaches used throughout the day, including the composite case studies and poetry to explore shared experiences, frustrations, and possibilities.

Several next steps for the research team and Sycamore Bairns' Hoose strategic group were identified from the day's activities:

- Review the current system diagram to add more detail and find ways to represent the complexities and variations in children and young people's journeys.
- Develop the case studies as a standalone document for agencies to use in their own workforce training and discussion.
- Use priorities identified on the day to inform the focus of the next phase of the evaluation and Sycamore Bairns' House development. It is important to note that participants identified three additional learning points (single point of contact, risk and sustainability, workforce support and development) that were noted in the report but not explored in detail. The full set of learning points represents an opportunity for the strategic group to ensure that professionals' priorities and concerns inform the next stage of the Sycamore Bairns' Hoose.

How Can We.

(author: Craig Houston)

How can we?

Provide trauma informed support, justice and recovery.

When we are existing within a system resembling completing a jigsaw in the dark.

With countless acronyms, aims and names.

Complex roles, pathways and delays.

How can we?

Provide trauma informed support, justice and recovery.

When funding streams run dry but the need it, multiplies.

And meaningful coordination is but a hallucination, provocative in the distance.

But.

Can we?

Provide trauma informed support, justice and recovery.

We may struggle to sway or portray the multi-agency network that intersects and directs our direction of travel, but I know we do not resist but instead persist to find creative and complimentary ways to blaze new trails.

A coalesce. Who dare to care. With a commitment to assess and address, to detect and reflect, to devise and recognise, our passion. It signifies, autonomy and desire to evolve, solve and resolve at every turn.

See we graft and craft to find new ways to integrate, mitigate and move across the plethora of strategic, practice and local authority, priority.

Can we?

Provide trauma informed support, justice and recovery.

See our idea is clear our intent meant.

We stand beside to guide the most precious of souls, through troubles and trauma, courage and chaos, hope and despair.

We are a collective of changemakers. Transformational troops. Reimagining what is possible. And.

We have a purpose. To uphold children's right and exhibit love, connection, safety, kindness, compassion.

We see not a victim, a case or diagnosis but a child. With hopes, dreams, fears, flaws and the beauty of youth.

We are a multi-disciplinary specialist socially synchronised symphony, an orchestra, exposed individually but together... powerful.

We do this not for acclaim, finance or fortune but for the moments, the magic moments, when hope becomes reality.

We.

Are Sycamore Bairns Hoose.

And.....

We provide trauma informed support, justice and recovery.