

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SERVICE PLAN 2024-25

OUR VISION

All children, young people, adults and families in Midlothian are supported to be the best they can be. This is achieved through a nurturing, respectful and collaborative approach that promotes wellbeing, equity and inclusion.



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INTRODUCTION

This document provides the reader with a basic understanding of the service.

The purpose of this service plan is to:

- Clearly show the key tasks and challenges of the service. This provides direction and an overview of the service's plans to those within and out with the service.
- Provide a basis for measuring and reporting on the progress of the service in achieving its priorities.
- Provide an overarching plan which supports the link between individual staff performance and development plans, work plans, team plans and Council and Community Planning priorities.

The Community Planning Partnership (CPP) draw together public, voluntary, and private sector bodies, and local communities to deliver a shared 'plan' to improve the lives of local people based on evidence. In Midlothian, the plan is called the Single Midlothian Plan (SMP). This is a shared partnership plan of how we will meet the needs of our local communities and brings together all the priorities for Midlothian into one place. Our outcomes for the next five years are:

- Individuals and communities have improved health and learning outcomes,
- No child or household need live in poverty,
- Significant progress is made towards net zero carbon emissions by 2030.

In Midlothian the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) Board is one of the subgroups of the CPP, and one of the main drivers for the effective delivery of services to children. The GIRFEC Plan also known as the Integrated Children's Service Plan 2023-26, is a statutory three-year plan devised by the local authority and health. The plan outlines four priority themes and several actions which are designed to improve the lives of children, young people, and families and in doing so, deliver on the three outcomes already outlined in the Single Midlothian Plan. The priority themes are as follows.

1. Children and Young People's Rights
2. Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing
3. Whole Family Wellbeing
4. Information Sharing and Commissioning

We continue to be fully committed to realising a children's rights approach to all our work and ensuring that we embed the principles of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and remain fully committed to our Promise commitments.

Like the rest of Scotland, we continue to experience the impact of the pandemic aftermath, the cost-of-living crisis, and the unprecedented changes within the economic, political, and social

landscape which brings both opportunities and challenges. Midlothian is one of the fastest growing Councils and has a relatively young population, with around 26% of residents aged between 0-21 years of age. This has increased over recent years, and the trend is expected to continue.

Midlothian Council continues to face demands and pressures never previously experienced. We are extremely proud to report that we have risen to each challenge and developed new and innovative approaches and services to meet the growing strain on service. This is due to the commitment and sheer determination of our workforce, our partners and not least our kinship and fostering population.

This annual Children's Services Plan 2024-25 describes how Children's Services will continue to build on this learning moving forwards, harnessing the energy, flexibility and creativity demonstrated by our workforce and key stakeholders. Embedding a culture of continuous improvement and innovation across the Directorate, in partnership with colleagues and services within the Place Directorate. The plan sets out how we will achieve our vision, what actions we will undertake and how we will measure our success.

SUCCESS & ACHIEVEMENTS: APRIL 2023-MARCH 2024

General

There have been many successes and achievements over the past year, as well as many changes. While the following is not an exhaustive list it provides a snapshot of some of our achievements

Referrals -Child Protection

A key workstream for 2023-24 was to map and review the differing referral routes into Children's Services to support us have a clearer overview and understanding of the significant increase in referrals. This piece of work proved to be successful and enabled us to redirect referrals into the appropriate services, such as Income Maximisation, Scottish Welfare Fund, Family Wellbeing Service and Early Intervention. This also meant families who required targeted social work intervention got the support they needed. This has led to greater confidence that referrals coming into Children's Services are appropriate leading to greater efficiency and better outcomes.

While we have experienced a significant and unparalleled increase in referrals into the services, the number of children's names on the child protection register has remained consistent. This strongly suggests that the investment into services at an earlier stage to promote families remaining together, continues to reap rewards. Services such as Family Wellbeing Service, Family Systemic Work, Family Group Decision Making and the Income Maximisation Officers, continue to go from strength to strength. As always, the child protection numbers do come with a health warning as these numbers can be impacted by larger families. The main reason for registering a child's name on the register continues to be the risk posed by domestic abuse although the impact of poverty remains a constant feature for those using our services.

In 2023, Children's Services were also involved in developing and implementing the revised Edinburgh and the Lothians Multi-agency Child Protection Procedures.

The Promise

Midlothian's Promise workstreams are well underway and continue to drive forward the wider partnership and Children's Services improvements. The 2024-30 priority areas are:

- A Good Childhood
- Whole Family Support
- Supporting the Workforce
- Planning
- Building Capacity

Midlothian's Looked after Children and Young People

As of March 2024, there were 194 looked after children in Midlothian, which equates to 0.95% of the 0-17-year-old population. As with our child protection figures these numbers have remained consistent over the last few years. Therefore, despite the increase in referrals the figure would suggest that realigning services and budgets towards earlier interventions is proving to be successful. Our underpinning principle continues to be that wherever it is safe to do so children and

young people will live in a safe, stable, and nurturing family environment. If it is not possible for a child to remain within their birth families, we would always seek to place the child with their own kin before exploring any other alternative arrangement. In line with the foundations of The Promise, we firmly believe that children should be able to maintain their relationships with friends, siblings, family, school, and communities and for that reason we are unwilling to place a child far from Midlothian. There are some occasions when we may have to place a child further than we would like although this is rare and often linked to particular care needs.

Looked after Population	Numbers	Percentage
Total	194	
At home with parents	42	22%
Friends and relatives	69	36%
Foster Carers	57	29%
Prospective adopters	6	3%
Residential, Schools & Secure	20	10%
Aftercare/Continuing Care	198	
Receiving Aftercare Services	61	31%
Continuing Care	117	59%
After Care/National Housing Project	20	10%

We have striven to focus our attention upon the overview and scrutiny of permanence planning for our children and young people, whether this be within the family home, kinship care or out with the family.

Family Wellbeing Services

The Family Wellbeing Service which was softly launched in 2023 is beginning to have an impact. The investment of resources provided by Education has meant that the team can support schools to improve children’s attendance and wellbeing. While still in its infancy a significant amount of investment has gone into the team to ensure the team and others have a good understanding of their role and remit. They are already working with 100 families and 177 children and young people; this equates to 172 referrals over the past year. We were fortunate to appoint a permanent Team Leader into the Family Wellbeing Service in January 2024 who has a wealth of experience. Work is well underway with our 3rd sector partners to agree how we allocate funding to support a holistic approach to working with families in Midlothian. The aspiration is that as the Family Wellbeing Service consolidates and expands their reach, there will be a reduction of referrals into Children’s Services.

Self-Directed Support for children impacted by Disability.

There has been an 80% increase in the number of families using Self Directed Support options which is a great achievement, thus allowing families to determine how and when they wish to utilise funding to support their children and young people.

Family Group Decision Making

We continue to commit to having Family Group Decision Making as a core part of Children's Services. We have committed to providing ongoing funding for this area of work going forward.

Midlothian Housing Project

In June 2023, a report was taken to Council to approve the Midlothian Housing Project becoming a permanent element of the Children's Services structure. During this reporting period we now have a total of 30 young people having moved into their own permanent home through the intensive support from Housing Project team.

The Midlothian House Project continues to be held an example of excellent practice, as recognised following a recent visit by Fraser McKinley, Chief Executive of the Promise Scotland.

Children and Young People in Conflict with the Law

Our local, collaborative approach towards youth justice, which involves key partners; Education, Community and Lifelong Education, 3rd Sector, Police Scotland, Children's Services, and Business owners continues to develop creative approaches to reduce youth offending. This has been achieved through using a successful, restorative approach to reduce crimes involving shoplifting, weapons, or anti-social behaviour.

We have engaged with CYCJ and colleagues in neighbouring authorities to share experiences and learning with a view to ensuring that we continue to provide a robust response to our children and young people in conflict with the law.

Care Homes

In 2022 our two Children's Houses were inspected by the Care Inspectorate and received 'very good' grades. This was a significant achievement.

Foster Care

In February 2024 the Council approved a 5.5% fee increase for foster carers this was in addition to the Scottish Recommend Allowance being agreed by Scottish Government. We plan to embark on a recruitment campaign for foster carers, short break carers and carers who may wish to foster unaccompanied asylum seeking children in Summer 2024.

Income Maximisation and Child Poverty

Our earlier identification of families who may need additional support from the Scottish Welfare Fund means that families are provided with earlier supports to prevent poverty crisis. In 2023, the Income Maximisation Officers within Children's Services assisted 48 families through 429 individual advice sessions. In total they advised on 1095 issues and achieved £130,123 in financial gain for local families.

Hawthorn Family Learning Centre

During 2023, both the operational and service manager returned to work having been on maternity leave. This has enabled several service developments to take place and plans are well underway to

ensure the service can meet the increased demands as well as pressure on resources during 2024-25. The centre continues to be a pivotal part of the community and is instrumental in developing initiatives to support local children and families.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

We continue to support and identify accommodation for our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people who come to Midlothian via the national transfer scheme. This scheme mandates all local authorities to accept children and young people who arrive in the UK, mainly on the small boats arriving in Kent. In addition, we also support families arriving from Afghanistan and the many families fleeing from Ukraine because of the war. Many of the Ukrainian families arrived in Midlothian as part of the Scottish Government hosting scheme which was a significant piece of work. The work involves a very small team of staff who work tirelessly to ensure that all families who were placed with a host in Midlothian were welcomed and reassured that the relevant checks had been undertaken prior to their arrival. They were further supported by a variety of different agencies to enrol their children in nurseries and schools, find employment, and integrate into their new communities.

CHALLENGES

Workforce

Like the national and UK-wide landscape, Midlothian continues to experience the same workforce issues encountered by other Councils. There is a general lack of experienced and skilled staff across the sector, which has inadvertently led to higher rates of absence due to the pressures and demand placed on our experienced, permanent staff. This means we have had to increasingly rely on locum workers.

National Care Service

While we are yet to discover whether Children's Services and Justice will become part of the National Care Service, discussions are already underway regarding a National Social Work Agency which would offer national workforce terms and conditions for social work across Scotland. As the national debates progress, we will continue to focus our efforts locally to recruit and retain staff.

Recruitment of Foster Carers

Another significant challenge is unsurprisingly the recruitment of foster carers which again, is also a national issue. As the current fostering population ages, it is becoming increasingly difficult to replace our existing cohort which is mainly due to a range of social, economic, and political factors. A key priority for Midlothian in 2024 is to create and launch an innovative local recruitment campaign, utilising social media in a bid to attract bespoke and varied foster carers.

The Care Inspectorate inspected our Fostering, Adoption and Continuing Care services in September 2023. The grades awarded were 3 (adequate). This was disappointing however should be considered in the context of this being a very unsettled time within the team with many staffing changes. An improvement plan is in place with progress regularly reported to the Social Work Assurance Group (SWAG).

Poverty

Despite the investment into Income Maximisation Officers the cost-of-living crisis continues to add significant pressures and demands on all our services. While we have realigned budgets to focus on earlier intervention services, we are aware that the pressures and demand associated with poverty will continue. This is an area we will monitor and review throughout 2024-25.

Child and Mental Health Service – Waiting Times

The number of children on the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) waiting list is monitored and reported on to Scottish Government. The ever-increasing waiting list for children and young people awaiting a neurodevelopmental assessment is the biggest concern with an average of 200 names being added to this waiting list every quarter. Whilst this is not unique to Midlothian, there are real concerns that children will be 'aged out' before they are ever offered an appointment. Whilst not all cases will require clinical input the concerns are around how we support children and families in the interim. A key priority is the Lothian wide workstream who are looking at the development of a neurodevelopmental pathway to support local children and young people with ASN and Complex and Enduring Needs.

We are working with CAMHS at establishing a Single Point of Access which shall initially only deal with mental health referrals but will through time include all referrals into children's services, education and family support services.

Children and Families impacted by Disability

We have seen an increase in the numbers of families being provided Section 23 assessments of unmet need and choosing to use Self-Directed Support. While this is a positive move, a major challenge has been the lack of resources within communities to support families with short breaks or clubs for children who have additional support needs. Many organisations do not provide services for families of children impacted by disability because of the expenditure needed in terms of staffing, skill, and equipment. As the numbers of children being diagnosed with an additional support need increases, we need to be more creative and innovative around providing services. During 2024, we will develop a longer-term vision for children with disabilities that includes strengthening the interface within the Council, Education, Adult Health & Social Care and the 3rd Sector. We have restructured the Children's Services senior team to include a dedicated Service Manager to focus on this area.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES STRUCTURE

Duty and Early Assessment Teams

This team consists of social workers and children and families' practitioners who undertake all initial assessments, child protection, short term work and report writing. At the time of writing, we have developed a bespoke, small team to focus on the Section 23 assessment, packages of care and/or any accompanying Self-Directed Support. This will become part of the wider 2024-25 Disability strategy and work streams.

Early Intervention & Prevention Manager and Promise Lead

This officer supports the Corporate Parenting and Promise workstream throughout the Midlothian partnership and is responsible for ensuring the priorities and actions identified as part of #Keeping the Promise in Midlothian, are on track. The officer also plays a key role in supporting and progressing the agenda for children and young people in conflict with the law. The officer has robust links with internal and external services and partners and manages service contracts.

Practice Team

The social workers and children and family practitioners within the practice team support children who are on the child protection register or at risk of becoming accommodated or looked after either at home or away from home.

Adopting a children's rights approach and with the Promise at the centre of all of their work, the team strive to achieve permanent outcomes for children and young people, ideally within their family but where necessary in alternative placements. This involves robust assessment and presentation of information to inform decision making at children's hearings, permanence panels and court. The team supports several unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, as well as young people in continuing care, and providing aftercare support to eligible care experienced young people. The team also supports children and young people in conflict with the law.

Midlothian House Project

This service is aligned with the Practice Team and supports young people exiting the care system to live connected and fulfilling lives, in line with our Promise and corporate parenting responsibilities. The young people are supported by a holistic team to enable them to fulfil their potential and to ensure that no care leaver becomes homeless. This project has been recognised nationally. There is also a dedicated worker who supports our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.

Family Group Decision Making Service

This group of social workers and children and families' practitioners who provide a service that is founded on a rights based approach. They work with families to ensure children and young people are placed with extended family or friends, when safe to do so, before looking at any alternative arrangement. The team manager also has oversight of kinship care and lifelong links and systemic Family support.

Systemic Family Support

This small team also works to support families find their own solutions through an enabling, facilitated approach.

Care Homes for Children and Young People

Our two local care homes offer care and support to children and young people aged 8-18 to ensure they remain within Midlothian, within their communities and close to family and friends. The last inspection awarded grades of 5 (Very Good) and commented positively on their nurturing and trauma informed approach.

Family Centred Care– Fostering/ Adoption/ Continuing Care

This team of social workers ensure there are sufficient carers and adopters to meet the needs of children and families. They also offer ongoing support and training to foster carers including kinship carers. This team offers a critical resource to children's services. An inspection was held in 2023, where the grades awarded were 3 (adequate). This was at a time when there were several changes associated with the team. Since this date there has been an investment into the carers population, recruitment of workers and an improvement plan is in place with progress regularly reported to the Social Work Assurance Group (SWAG).

Reviewing Officers (RO)

The RO's are qualified social workers, and chair all child protection, looked after away from home and looked after at home reviews. They ensure that planning is being progressed and highlight and report on any drift or barriers within the care planning. They provide a monthly quality assurance report to senior officers highlighting good practice, areas for development and any particular trends within practice. This information is shared with team leaders and our learning and development colleagues to inform future training needs.

Midlothian Family Wellbeing Service

This team was set up through the Whole Family Wellbeing Funding (WFWF) and additional resource provided by Education as part of its restructure, and a commitment to design a new service that offers support at a much earlier point of contact. Though we have recruited the team, it is still in its infancy and will inform the 2024-25 actions going forward.

KEY PRIORITY AREAS FOR 2024/25

Families Impacted by Disability

This is a key priority for 2024-25. We intend to reshape the senior manager structure to include an additional Service Manager within the current budget who will work with Education, Adult Health and Social Care, and the 3rd Sector to deliver a model of care that focuses on providing seamless transitions for children and young people who have additional support and complex needs. The model will incorporate the underpinning principle of good transitions and provide a pathway to improve support as well as manage expectations for both families and workers.

Neurodevelopmental pathway

As already highlighted the number of children awaiting an appointment for a neurodevelopmental assessment is increasing at a worrying rate. It is anticipated that not all cases will require a clinical input from CAMHS so a key priority for 2024/25 will be the development of a neurodevelopmental pathway to support local children and young people with ASN and Complex and Enduring Needs.

Family Wellbeing Service

During 2024-25 we will continue to consolidate and expand the service to ensure that is truly holistic in its support of families who need to access support and resources when they require them. A key workstream will be the collaboration with the 3rd sector to ensure our joint resources can respond to need. We want to deliver a service that is both creative and trauma informed in its approach and can demonstrate that it empowers families to find solutions through a range of support and interventions. Key actions will include how we continue to support families and employees through the cost-of-living crisis that is impacting Midlothian and beyond.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

This is an area of work that has grown exponentially over the past few years and the team have worked hard to meet the ongoing requests for placements. The number of young people arriving in Midlothian who require to be looked after in a safe environment has increased leading to a strain on resources and, like Councils across Scotland, the pressure is unsustainable long term. In addition to this we continue to resource a team for those arriving from Ukraine and Afghanistan. The increased pressure on resources across Midlothian is significant as we adapt and create different models of working to ensure we can meet future demand.

Foster Carer Recruitment

There is a national shortage of foster carers across Scotland and despite many attempts to find a national solution to recruiting more foster carers this continues to be an ongoing challenge. We increased our foster care fees foster care in 2023-24 and agreed a key priority for 2024-25 is to invest in an online and social media campaign in an effort to increase our foster care population. This recruitment strategy is due to commence in May/June 2024. The impact of this is that we have very limited resources within Midlothian and need to enhance and therefore need to ensure we have sufficient care placements to keep all children and young people within Midlothian.

Workforce

There is a national shortage of workers within social work and social care across Scotland. Recruitment and retention of social workers is a concern. Scottish Government are supporting the development of a national social work agency which would offer the same working terms and conditions to all workers across the nation. This would benefit Midlothian who are in constant competition with larger neighbouring local authorities' salaries which are significantly greater than ours.

In addition, we are committed to supporting our existing workforce with their health and wellbeing. We want to ensure we have a workplace culture that is supportive, inclusive and focused on learning and improvement. In 24/25 we will undertake consultation to explore ways to improve staff wellbeing and the workplace culture.

KEY DRIVERS

United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The Convention has 54 articles that cover all aspects of a child's life and set out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that all children everywhere are entitled to. It also explains how adults and governments must work together to make sure all children can enjoy all their rights. Adopting and embedding the UNCRC articles will be a key focus going forward.

The Promise

In October 2016, the First Minister announced an independent 'root and branch' review of the children's care system ("The Care Review"). The review concluded that while much had been done to support children and young people who became part of the care system it was piecemeal and inconsistent across Scotland. The 'Independent Care Review' concluded that services needed to improve as a matter of urgency. Consequently 'The Promise' emerged as a key driver for transformational change. The Promise provides a strong basis for transforming and strengthening services to support parenting and ultimately, improve the lives of looked after and care experienced children and young people in Midlothian.

National Care Services

The Scottish Government have laid a Bill in parliament which seeks to establish a National Care Service. The Bill essentially provides a brief outline as to what a National Care Service could look like in terms of power and responsibilities for Scottish government and Councils, though further discussion is to take place. There will also be further consultation as to whether Children's Services and Justice Services would transfer over to the National Care Service. We await further details on the proposal and will make sure all workforce and other stakeholders are kept informed.

Mental Health Services

The increase in requests for mental health support continues to be a challenge, not just within Midlothian but across the country. Additional funding from Central Government has enabled us to collaborate and work with our 3rd Sector colleagues to develop a range of less stigmatising services that children and families can access at an early stage to support their mental health and wellbeing. Discussions are ongoing to further develop services, and this remains a priority area of work over the coming year.

Children's Care and Justice Bill

The age of criminal responsibility was raised from 8 years of age to 12 years of age in 2021. The intention of the Children's Care and Justice Bill is to divert children and those under 18 from becoming involved with justice services by supporting them through age-appropriate systems and services. The Children's Care and Justice Bill also aims to reduce the number of children in Young Offenders' Institutions and reform the placement of children in secure care. We welcome the legislation which endorses our local services which are founded on diverting children away from criminal proceedings.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES IMPROVEMENT PLAN FOR 2024/25

	Service Priority Actions	Performance Indicator	Due Date	Target	Baseline	Previous Trend Data	Managed By	Source	New Indicator for 2023/24 yes or no
1	Ensure the Midlothian Wellbeing Service is aligned with other family supports across Midlothian	Develop transparent pathway to ensure 3 rd sector partners have equitable access to funding resources within the Family Wellbeing Service.	31/03/25	New Measure	23/24	0	Rebecca Hooton Chief Officer	Internal Systems	No
		Develop a series of performance indicators and baseline figures to measure outcomes for Family Wellbeing Service	31/03/25	New Measure	0	N/A	Rebecca Hooton Chief Officer	Internal Systems	Yes
2	Develop a transitions strategy and pathway across Children's Services, Education and Adult Health & Social Care	<u>1st Phase</u> Map and review existing interface to support the proposal for standalone disability/transitions team.	31/03/25	New Measure		0	Emma Clater Service Manager	Internal Systems	No
		Develop a disability transition policy that supports children moving into adult services who have additional support needs	31/03/25	Linked to disability and ND workstreams	N/A	N/A	Emma Clater Service Manager		Yes

3	Maintain supports offered by Family Group Decision Making and Kinship staff to ensure children remain with birth/ kin families.	Increase the number of families who participate in Family Group Decision Making	31/03/25	2023-24 Figures		23/24 data	Lesley Watson Service Manager	Internal Systems	Yes
		Increase the number of families who have a Family plan included in their care plan	31/03/25	2023-24 Figures		23/24 data	Lesley Watson Service Manager	Internal Systems	Yes
		Increase the number of Kinship assessment undertaken.	31/03/25	Increase by 30%	22/23	22/23 data	Lesley Watson Service Manager	Internal Systems	Yes
		Develop and implement permanence process to formally secure children in kinship	31/03/25	1 X clear policy (linked to perm. policy)	N/A	0	All Service Managers	Internal Systems	Yes
		Evidence learning from complaints and unplanned endings is shared across the service.	31/03/25	100% learning shared	New Measure	N/A (new Measure)	All Service Managers	Internal systems	Yes
		Continue to review and develop the support offered by the Practice Team	31/03/25	Ongoing review of progress	New measure		Lorrette Nicol Service Manager	Internal systems	Yes
	Strengthen the number staff who understand the	Increase the number of staff and carers trained in using a trauma informed approach	31/03/25	25	20	N/A	All Service Managers	Internal systems	Yes

	importance of trauma informed practice	Continue to promote training opportunities and development for all Children's Services staff	31/03/25		23/24 figures	23/24	Learning and Development /Service Managers		Yes
		Offer a range of activities and sessions that support staff wellbeing	31/05/25				Service Managers/OD		Yes