



Scotland's First Bairns Hoose Members' Business Debate

13th September 2023

“The Bairns Hoose looks and feels like a safe space, where children feel welcomed.”

Voice of a young person leading the [online tour](#) of Scotland's first Bairns Hoose.

Scotland's First Bairns Hoose

- Led by charity Children 1st alongside Victim Support Scotland, the University of Edinburgh, and Children England – with £1.5m funding from players of People's Postcode Lottery, **Scotland's first Bairns Hoose opened in August 2023.**
- This is based on the European Barnahus model and means that children and young people who experience abuse and violence will be able to get all the protection, care, justice and recovery support they need **under one roof**. This will support children and young people in East Dunbartonshire, East Renfrewshire, Inverclyde and Renfrewshire.
- Through the Bairns Hoose, it is possible to put the needs and rights of children and young people at the centre of child protection and justice processes. They can avoid the need to repeatedly share their story over and over, and **their journey can ultimately heal, rather than harm.**
- This is needed across Scotland, because **while we can't always stop bad things happening to children and young people – we can do everything in our power to help them to recover.**

Why do we need a Bairns Hoose? The case for change

- The scale of harm children and young people in Scotland experience is significant. At least 37% of the 14,602 sexual crimes [recorded in 2022-23](#) by police related to a victim under 18.
- At the moment, children who experience hurt and harm are processed through a complex system of care and justice and are asked to re-tell and re-live traumatic experiences over and over – sometimes [up to 14 times](#). The whole process creates standalone trauma.
- Children 1st have been witness to this for decades, through the trauma recovery support we provide across Scotland. Exhausting delays in cases mean that fear and anticipation surrounding going to court lasts years, and repeated adjournments mean that anxiety and stress build repeatedly up to a court date. Children and families tell us that court buildings feel unsafe and untrustworthy. Giving evidence in court can be brutal.

One young person who had been sexually assaulted had to give evidence at High Court and shared her experience of being cross examined. It was highly traumatic, as well as having to see the man in court, and have her name called over a tannoy system as “a witness”. She also was unprepared for hearing his name on the tannoy and this caused anxiety and flashbacks. She was accused by the defence agent of being promiscuous and asked, “why didn't you scream and run out of the house?” Afterwards she reflected on being made to feel that she was guilty and questioned at what stage was she allowed to be the victim, not the witness.

Children 1st [Sharing Stories for Change](#)

- This all has a long-term impact on children's lives, and can lead to a lack of sleep, anxiety, fear, flashbacks, and missing school. We know that everyone involved wants to support children, protect their rights and promote their safety. But too often, the spaces and processes that people are working in just don't allow it.

What is the Bairns Hoose?

- The Bairns Hoose is based on the [European Barnahus model](#), which is a child-friendly, multidisciplinary and interagency model responding to child victims and witnesses of violence. It is a place where children and young people are interviewed and medically examined for forensic purposes, assessed, and receive recovery services from the right people all in one place.
- It is a trauma-informed space, designed to reduce feelings of anxiousness, fear and a lack of support and control that are so often associated with victims and witnesses' experiences of justice. It is warm, welcoming and has been built in partnership with children and young people.
- One of the major aims of the Bairns Hoose is to support the gathering of high quality, pre-recorded evidence that can be used in court, so that the number of times children have to tell their story can be reduced as far as possible. It has high quality technical facilities, including space to record evidence, and to deliver live links to court. The high quality set up, and close links to all the relevant professionals, should remove the need for children to attend court at all.
- With that, we can focus on their recovery. Children and young people have the right to recovery. [Article 39 of the UNCRC](#), states that children have a right to recovery and reintegration, following experiences of hurt and harm, in an environment that "fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child". However, this part often gets lost in child protection and justice processes.
- The views of children and young people have been at the core of this work throughout, upholding their right to be heard under Article 12 of the UNCRC. As one young person told us, "Just because we're children, doesn't mean we don't have strong feelings and don't understand things." This work includes influence through our Changemakers group, who have been central to the design and development of the Bairns Hoose.

The road to the first Bairns Hoose

- The opening of Scotland's first Bairns Hoose follows many years of work across Scotland, and Europe. In 2013 Lord Carloway called for "clear-sky thinking" to help modernise Scotland's trial procedures, in light of modern technology and thinking, in the [Evidence and Procedure Review](#).
- This review said: *"It is now widely accepted that taking the evidence of young and vulnerable witnesses requires special care, and that subjecting them to the traditional adversarial form of examination and cross-examination is no longer acceptable."*

- The Review said this is because “recounting traumatic events is especially distressing for children, and can cause long-term damage”, and traditional methods used in court are not a good way to gather clear, accurate evidence. It said Barnahus is “the ideal to which we should aspire”.
- Children 1st has worked with partners right across Scotland’s protection and justice systems to develop an understanding of how this model might work in a Scottish context, including through our [Delivering the Vision](#) leadership group, high quality evaluation with the University of Edinburgh, the Scottish Government and supporting the [Scottish Bairns Hoose Standards](#).

The Road Ahead

- The Bairns Hoose model needs to be made available to children right across Scotland so that every single child has the best possible chance to be safe, to give their best evidence and to recover. This should be scaled right across Scotland – with consistent quality throughout. This will take real resource and commitment.
- Looking ahead, we want the work in North Strathclyde to be the template for the Bairns Hoose model in Scotland. We are determined to share our learning far and wide and to advocate for the best possible practice, led by what children tell us needs to be different.
- The Scottish Government committed in the [Programme for Government](#) to launch ‘Pathfinders’ this Autumn, which will support new work and partnerships to develop. There is a strong commitment across police, justice, health, social work and the third sector leaders to deliver this transformation, which will realise children’s rights to justice and recovery.
- However, more effort is needed to make sure children have the option to pre-record or live link to court. [Research conducted by the University of Edinburgh](#) evaluating Bairns Hoose published in March 2023 clearly shows that despite these options being technically possible, and while some improvement might be recognised in High Court cases, **“the requirement [to attend court] remained in almost all cases”**. **This must be urgently addressed, by implementing the Vulnerable Witnesses (Criminal Evidence) (Scotland) Act 2019 in full.**

Children 1st

At Children 1st our ambition is for every child in Scotland to be safe, loved and well, together with their family. As a charity we offer emotional, practical, and financial support to help families to put children first and campaign to uphold the rights of every child.

We work to protect children who experience trauma and abuse and to support them to recover from their experiences. We have campaigned for years to bring the Barnahus model to Scotland, because the children we work alongside tell us that the current justice, care and protection system often causes further trauma. Their voices have been at the centre of this work throughout.

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