Scottish Government Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder Project Team

One Year of Progress: Reflections from Bairns' Hoose Standards Self-Assessment and Readiness Tool (StART 1[1])

Collaboration

Scottish Government's Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder phase is demonstrating strong progress in testing and embedding the Standards across varied local contexts. Partnerships are leveraging existing systems to ensure coherent, child-centred service delivery, with a clear commitment to multi-agency collaboration.

Findings from StART 1 highlight the value of multi-agency integration, which has aligned efforts and sparked innovation. Regular information-sharing and mapping sessions have fostered collaborative learning, underpinned by strong local governance tailored to community needs.

To support this momentum, biannual in-person collaborative learning events have been introduced following on from the Pathfinder Introductory Workshop in Edinburgh in November 2023. The first Collaborative Learning event was held in Glasgow in April 2024 for the six Pathfinder partnerships, and in recognition of the increased interest from areas beyond Pathfinders, subsequent events were opened up to the wider stakeholder groups with an interest in Bairns' Hoose development.

The October 2024 Collaborative Learning Event was held on the anniversary of the Pathfinder phase being launched and was attended by Bragi Gudbrandsson, founder of the Barnahus model and vice chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, following his visits to a number of Bairns' Hoose partnerships. Bragi praised the progress Scotland had made, reflecting that he was "confident that Scotland is setting a new standard in child-centred, trauma-informed care and support that will inspire others across Europe and beyond."

The April 2025 Collaborative Learning event in Perth included a particular focus on Bairns' Hoose and justice; and Bairns' Hoose and health. This partnership-led event demonstrated the progress made across partnerships, providing opportunities to share learning and demonstrating the commitment to testing the Standards across Scotland. The next event is planned for 18 November 2025. These events are complemented by ongoing virtual Knowledge Exchange webinars and insights sessions to ensure continuous learning is shared across Bairns' Hoose partnerships and with national partners.

While the shared commitment is evident, StART 1 notes that practical implementation of the Standards is still evolving, with more structured frameworks and sustained training needed to embed the model nationally. This is why we have established the National Bairns' Hoose Implementation Group (NBHIG) to bring together key delivery partners (including Pathfinder and Affiliate partnerships) to support the work of the programme development and identify areas needing a particular national focus. Designed as an advisory body, the NBHIG meets at least three times a year and provides strategic advice, operational input and early guidance to partnerships at each stage of programme development. This group has now met on three occasions with partnerships welcoming the opportunity to present shared learning through spotlight sessions to group members and input to and discuss upcoming programme milestones. The progress of the group is also supported by working groups focused on emerging issues, such as children and young people's engagement and development of Bairns' Hoose indicators.

[1] StART1 was complete by five Pathfinders partnerships in February 2024. Developed by Healthcare Improvement Scotland and Care Inspectorate, StART has been developed to support Pathfinders in understanding their own current state of implementation and in providing a national picture of progress against Bairns' Hoose Standards. StART will help us identify where work may need to be targeted across the system and what support is required. All Pathfinders are invited to complete StART 2 by August 2025.

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NBHIG's workplan has been developed in line with the Scottish Government's vision for Bairns' Hoose and to align with the Bairns' Hoose Delivery Plan. In line with our commitment to review actions and progress towards incremental rollout of Bairns' Hoose during 2027, a refreshed Bairns' Hoose Delivery Plan is expected to be published in the coming months.

The national programme is currently supported by five targeted workstreams (analysis, knowledge exchange, quality improvement, children and young people engagement, and funding support) developed in close collaboration with partners in the Bairns' Hoose project team and through our wider programme structures, creating a robust framework that powers our collective efforts across Scotland.

Crucially, StART 1 findings demonstrate that Pathfinders consistently prioritise the child's best interests, particularly through Interagency Referral Discussions (IRDs) and that values of kindness, empathy, and respect are not just principles — they are embedded in daily practice.

Local Adaptation

StART 1 has proven to be a valuable tool for Pathfinder partnerships, supporting both strategic planning and continuous improvement. Partnerships have used their StART 1 submissions to assess progress against the Bairns' Hoose Standards, identify priority areas for development, and shape local implementation plans.

Scottish Government Quality Improvement Advisors offered their support to all Pathfinders and have worked closely with some areas to develop tailored improvement plans informed by StART 1 making it a core component of the support provided. The tool has also been instrumental in shaping our national Knowledge Exchange programme and collaborative learning events by helping to ensure these are grounded in the real experiences, needs, and identified priorities of the Pathfinders.

StART 1 evidence confirms that Pathfinder partnerships across Scotland are deeply committed to establishing fully functional Bairns' Hooses, rooted in trauma-informed, child-centred values. This commitment is reflected in their flexible, locally responsive approaches, shaped by collaboration between health, local authorities, Police Scotland, justice and third sector partners. StART 1 reporting clearly demonstrated that Pathfinders are flexible and agile in adapting their strategies to reflect the unique needs, challenges and resources of their local communities.

This responsiveness has enabled Bairns' Hoose to take root in diverse contexts, from urban to remote and rural areas. Several Pathfinders have made significant strides in identifying suitable locations and developing welcoming, child-friendly interiors as a core value, with some actively involving children and young people in the design process. While dedicated physical locations have yet to be established in some areas, StART 1 reporting shows that Pathfinders have continued to deliver services through innovative approaches, including the use of soft-boundary models to extend support beyond geographical limits.

StART 1 found that key challenges for Pathfinders' were a lack of a physical building, a lack of financial and/or staff resources for therapeutic support or counselling and challenges in locating and/or referring to services which could support sustained wrap-around care for the wellbeing of children and families.

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Challenges in rural areas underscore the need for targeted investment and strategic integration into broader planning. Learning and knowledge from our remote, rural and island partners is being gathered at all stages to inform and shape the national Blueprint for Bairns' Hoose. To support this, Scottish Government Quality Improvement Advisors and Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) are working closely with remote, rural and island partners in their understanding and planning informed by the START 1 submission.

In recognition of the systems change required, the Scottish Government has supported Bairns' Hoose with £10.5 million further investment towards the programme in 2025-2026. £9 million of this total investment has been made available, as targeted support, across the Pathfinder, Affiliate, and Development funds for the financial year 2025 – 2026.

StART 1 reporting highlights an opportunity to introduce more systematic monitoring mechanisms to assess how trauma-informed practices are being applied in practice with the need to ensure consistent access to trained professionals. This work should support local contexts while improving and streamlining referrals to health and wellbeing services.

To support this journey, Scottish Government analysts have set up a working group to co-design quantitative indicators initially for all Pathfinder and Affiliate areas, and longer-term, for all Bairns' Hoose partnerships. The indicators will provide the national picture of Bairns' Hoose; identify what works well and where more improvement/support is needed.

The expected outcome of the Pathfinder phase is that we will have sufficient knowledge about how the Standards (the "what") work in different contexts to develop a national Bairns' Hoose Blueprint (the "how"), which will underpin the next phase for incremental rollout. Ongoing assessment of local adaptations will be critical to understanding what works, where, and why, ensuring that solutions are both effective and scalable

Development of Bairns' Hoose toolkit and Blueprint scoping. As we progress through the Pathfinder phase towards spring 2027, our focus increasingly turns to consolidating learning from the Pathfinder phase to develop the national Blueprint for incremental rollout from summer 2027 supported by a national toolkit. An approach to Bairns' Hoose Blueprint development has been agreed with Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS). HIS will facilitate a series of engagement sessions with key groups, including NBHIG, over the summer and early autumn to support a shared understanding of the Blueprint and inform the next phase of development. A draft Terms of Reference for a Blueprint Development Group will be brought to NBHIG in the autumn for further consideration of how best NBHIG can play a vital role in the development of the Blueprint.

Justice System Readiness

The challenges children face in interacting with the justice system has been one of the driving forces behind Bairns' Hoose and continues to be integral in our approach to development. The Scottish Government continues to support national implementation of the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM), now operational in all policing divisions and 31 local authorities — covering the majority of Scotland's child population. Interviewers have been recruited within the final local authority with specialised training beginning August 2025. We also recognise the importance of reliable and high-quality equipment to support video recording interviewing and have funded Police Scotland to upgrade equipment across Scotland as part of the Scottish Government Bairns' Hoose Fund in 2024-25 and 2025-26 financial years.

StART 1 reporting highlights both the complexity and importance of ensuring appropriate special measures—such as live commission and court links—when children give evidence. These challenges require close coordination with justice partners, and Pathfinders have responded with a constructive, solution-focused approach.

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A shared commitment to trauma-informed, rights-respecting practice is evident across partnerships, with collaborative efforts underway to strengthen integration with justice processes including ongoing work between justice partners and partnerships to explore the technical, operational and strategic aspects of establishing and operating live link to court proceedings. As part of the Knowledge Exchange offer to all partnerships, a number of dedicated justice-focused sessions have been delivered, with further opportunities for learning and collaboration under consideration. The National joint investigative interviewing (JII) Team continues to provide critical implementation support, including professional development for interview teams.

To guide the next phase, the Scottish Government is supporting a review of the national guidance for JII, which will reflect the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM) as the practice model for JIIs. Local partnerships are actively contributing to ensure the revised guidance reflects best practice and that the lived experiences of children and young people is taken into account in the emerging content. To support the next stage of work and the full implementation of SCIM, a new National Oversight Group for JII has been established with multiagency representation.

The Scottish Government also recognises the need for continued alignment between SCIM, Bairns' Hoose, and broader justice reforms, including the rollout of the Vulnerable Witnesses (Criminal Evidence) (Scotland) Act 2019.

The Scottish Government has been working closely with delivery partners across the sector including Police Scotland, prosecutors and those delivering vital support services for child victims and witnesses. This collaboration includes Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS), who have been instrumental in progressing a data sharing agreement with Children First as a third sector partner, within the North Strathclyde Partnership. The agreement is now in its final stages of completion.

Data Sharing

StART 1 highlights that Pathfinders sought guidance from the Scottish Government and keenly anticipated the National Data Sharing Agreement, which is indicated in the Bairns' Hoose Standards.

Key learning from this area has highlighted that, due to the diverse structures and operational models of each partnership, a single National Data Sharing Agreement is unlikely to be feasible. Variations in legal, risk, and procedural considerations mean that data sharing arrangements need to be developed and tailored locally. Partnerships are therefore encouraged to assess whether a local data sharing agreement is necessary based on their specific context. While the North Strathclyde agreement will not be shared publicly, it has been circulated to the COPFS Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) for each partnership and can be used as a reference where appropriate.

To support partnerships in this process, a "Data Sharing Considerations" document has also been developed and will be shared with partnerships to guide initial discussions and planning. Considerations are ongoing to explore potential ways in which partnerships might be further supported in this area.

A coordinated, cross-sector approach remains essential to ensure effective, trauma-informed justice for children.

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Embedding Children's Participation

Across all Pathfinders, there is an indisputable and shared aspiration to embed children's meaningful participation in every aspect of Bairns' Hoose delivery. This reflects a deep commitment to upholding children's rights and ensuring their voices shape the services designed to support them.

At the time of StART reporting, while progress is evident, participation strategies were still in the early stages of development. Key gaps include encouraging children and young peoples' sustained and ongoing involvement in monitoring and evaluation, insufficient influence on health and wellbeing service development, and a lack of accessible tools and resources to support communication with children and families. Pathfinders also emphasised the need to establish opportunities to gather feedback from children, young people, and their families regarding their experiences with service provision Reporting recognised the need for a greater degree of preemptive consideration of inclusion and accessibility and emphasised the need to integrate these considerations at the earliest stages of planning and decision-making to ensure equitable participation and remove potential barriers for all.

StART 1 reporting shows that Pathfinders have placed a strong emphasis on embedding trauma-informed care into systems and processes, ensuring that children and families are supported in a cohesive, compassionate, and psychologically safe environment. The integration of trauma-informed principles across services is a significant achievement, which will support the delivery of a consistent and supportive experience for all children and families engaging with Bairns' Hoose

A commitment to involve children and young people throughout the development of Bairns' Hoose was a central criterion to becoming a Pathfinder. This is why, to strengthen participation, each Pathfinder and Affiliate partnership have appointed a link worker—a dedicated advocate for children's voices across the programme. Scottish Government facilitate Link Worker meetings providing the opportunity to share best practice and support knowledge exchange.

Since the introductory first meeting between link workers in January 2025, Scottish Government Bairns' Hoose Unit has facilitated link workers to meet again during March with a third meeting expected in late June. To date, the group has welcomed presentations from Healthcare Improvement Scotland and Dr. Camille Warrington, Associate Professor of Edinburgh University and the University of Bedfordshire, who as part of an evaluation team for Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Bairns' Hoose Pathfinder partnerships, invited link workers to share current examples and tools used to gather feedback which will feed into a local pilot. During the last meeting, Fife Bairns' Hoose Participation and Officer, offered a presentation on establishing a participation framework within Bairns' Hoose.

Pathfinders have clearly articulated the need for national guidance and training to support the systematic embedding of participation across all aspects of Bairns' Hoose which will be scoped further through the Link Worker model.

Children's right to participation is a central and core component of the Bairns' Hoose model which is supported by Scottish Government's Bairns' Hoose - children and young people: participation and engagement plan (June 2023). Our national Bairns' Hoose Standards further outlines that children and young people, and their families, should be supported to be involved in discussions and decisions that affect them.

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Next Steps

The Bairns' Hoose Pathfinders, at the time of StART submission in February 2024, had made substantial progress in implementing a trauma-informed, multi-agency approach, achieving significant milestones across key areas. StART 1 submissions demonstrated Pathfinders strong commitment to continuous improvement, with key milestones achieved across several priority areas. Central to this progress was a consistent focus on the core values of kindness, empathy and respect.

As we move towards spring 2027, our focus will increasingly shift to consolidating learning from the Pathfinder phase. This will inform the development of a national Blueprint, guiding the phased implementation of the Bairns' Hoose model from summer 2027 onwards. To support this transition, a national toolkit will be developed, and we will look to the StART 2 submissions, expected in August 2025, to help identify and refine national priorities.

In parallel, the Scottish Government has commissioned Ipsos Scotland to deliver a final research report for the Pathfinder phase in March/April 2026. This will include, among other research tasks, analysis of the StART 2 submissions. Findings will be shared through our knowledge exchange programme, ensuring transparency and shared learning across the sector.

The Scottish Government remain committed to work closely with our delivery partners, building on the substantial progress made in testing and embedding Bairns' Hoose Standards across varied local contexts.

Bairns' Hoose Unit, Scottish Government
June 2025