

# **Children's Services** **Service Plan** **2023-24**

## **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.*



Joan Tranent  
CSWO & Chief Officer Children's Services, Partnerships & Communities  
Midlothian Council  
Fairfield House  
8 Lothian Road  
Dalkeith  
EH22 3Z

# Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Success and Achievements: April 2022- March 2023 .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Challenges .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Children’s Services Structure .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Key priority areas for 2023/24 .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Key Drivers .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Children’s Services Improvement Plan for 2023/23 .....</b>	<b>12</b>

# Introduction

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

The purpose of this service plan is to:

1. 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.
2. Provide a basis for measuring and reporting on the progress of the service in achieving its priorities.
3. 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 Board (GIRFEC) is one of the sub groups of the SMP, 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 2020-2023, is a statutory three year plan devised by the local authority and health. The plan develops key outcomes and priority actions which are designed to improve the lives of children, young people and families. The plan is coming to an end and a new three year plan 2023-2026 is currently being drafted.

The GIRFEC outcomes for the final year of the three year plan for 2022-23 are:

1. More children and young people are safe, healthy and resilient
2. More children and young people receive timely and effective mental health support when they need it
3. Inequalities in learning are reduced

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

Following the cost-of-living crisis and post pandemic challenges Midlothian Council has faced demands and pressures never previously experienced. As a result of this we have introduced a range of innovative ways of working within the services as well

as adapting existing practices to respond to the needs of our citizens, in particular those experiencing the greatest levels of poverty and inequality.

This annual children's services plan 2023-2024 describes how children's services will continue to build on this learning moving forwards, harnessing the energy, flexibility and creativity demonstrated by our workforce. 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 and Achievements: April 2022- March 2023**

Within Children's Services we have seen many successes and achievements over the past year, as well as many changes. Changes in staff at all levels as a result of people moving to new positions and maternity cover has resulted in new staff joining us which has been positive in bringing different views and ideas into the service. All staff have now returned to Eskdaill as we no longer have a requirement to curtail staff numbers within the building following the pandemic.

Here are some of the high-level success over the year, noting that there are too many to mention on an individual basis.

During this reporting period levels of children on the CP Register have remained static as have the number of children being accommodated, which suggests that we are managing referrals at the front end of the service, despite the significant increase in referrals. This data supports our theory that we are supporting families at earlier points of intervention and offering supports that prevent escalation in many cases.

In February 2023, we set up our Family Wellbeing Service who are based at Danderhall Primary. The funding for this has come from Scottish Government as part of The Promise funding but we have also received significant resource from Education to support them in managing the increased number of children and young people whose school attendance has been impacted as a result of Covid-19. Working together to identify low school attendance, which can often be an indicator of other concerns within a family, allows us to provide holistic support to the family to prevent an escalation of concerns. The service is in its infancy and going forward we will work towards ensuring our third sector colleagues are part of the improvement journey.

We have committed to having Family Group Decision Making as a core part of children's services as well as incorporating the Midlothian Housing Project into our day-to-day work. This is significant as we have managed to do this with no additional investment. These key areas of work evidence the commitment we have

as a service to ensuring we provide the best possible opportunities for our children and young people. During this reporting period another 10 young people were supported to move on from their care placement into the Housing project and work towards achieving their own tenancy.

The collaborative approach we have taken to tackle concerns around youth justice has resulted in fewer referrals to the children’s reporter on offence grounds. There have been ongoing campaigns involving Police Scotland, children’s services youth workers which have included asking local shops keepers and schools to consider creative approaches to reduce anti-social behaviour and shoplifting. Offering a restorative approach with young people and shop owners has resulted in some good outcomes. The ‘Midlothian No Knives Better Lives Campaign’ was a successful collaborative approach with young people in secondary schools along with staff from justice, children’s services and Police. The aim of this campaign was to develop an understanding and gather the young peoples’ perspectives and knowledge of knife crime and the effects it can on themselves and others.

Our two Children’s Houses were inspected by the Care Inspectorate and received ‘very good’ grades across two of the criteria. This was a significant achievement.

The following is an extract of the Care Inspectorate findings and award:

<b>How well do we support children and young people's rights and wellbeing?</b>	<b>5 - Very Good</b>
7.1 Children and young people are safe, feel loved and get the most out of life	5 - Very Good
7.2 Leaders and staff have the capacity and resources to meet and champion children and young people's needs and rights	5 - Very Good

- Young People were experiencing positive outcomes.
- The service had a clear model of relationship based practice.
- Staff approached care in a trauma informed way.
- Both houses were homely and welcoming environments.
- Management have a clear vision for service improvement.

We continue to support and identify accommodation for our unaccompanied asylum seeking children as well as families arriving from Afghanistan. This is in addition to supporting the many families fleeing from Ukraine because of the war. Many families arrived in Midlothian as part of the Scottish Government hosting scheme. This has been a very successful and significant piece of work. It involves a very small team of staff who have worked tirelessly to ensure that all families who were placed with a host in Midlothian were welcomed and reassured that 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**

Whilst there were many successes, the year has not been without its challenges, some of which are national issues. Maintaining enough staff within the social work workforce has been and remains an issue. This is also a national issue. The pandemic has resulted in many practitioners re-considering their work/life balance and career choice and resulted in many workers moving into other positions. Sickness absence within the workforce has also been an issue over the past year.

## **Recruitment of Foster Carers**

Challenges in the recruitment of foster carers is both a local and national issue. Large private fostering agencies offering higher fees and more attractive terms and conditions are a national issue. Working towards a national fees and allowances across all 32 local authorities has been an ongoing piece of work for many years but as yet no resolution has been agreed.

## **Poverty**

The cost-of-living crisis and poverty are major issues which impact on our service and beyond. Families struggling to eat and heat their homes due to rising prices in fuel and food. This impacts on not only those families we work with but also our own workforce.

## **Referrals into Services**

Taking cognisance of the rapid growth within our local authority it not surprising we have seen an increase in referral rates. However, having a rise of 37% more referrals over the past year is concerning and current resources are unable to manage this level of workload. There was a rise from 6,045 referrals to 8,287. The largest increase in referral reason was financial requests with an increase of 119% over the year. Referrals for financial assistance accounted for 26% of all referrals. Future work will consider how we better support families who are going to be most impacted by poverty what with the rising cost of living including fuel and food costs. As part of this work we employed an Income Maximization Officer who was able to support families apply for a further £234,330 in unclaimed benefits.

# 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, report writing and unallocated Section 23 assessments and/or any accompanying Self Directed Support

- **One x Early Intervention & Prevention Development Officers/Promise Lead**

This officer support schools and third sector partners to identify supports for children, young people and families who require additional support using a series of partnership /wellbeing meetings. The officer also has robust links with the Midlothian Family Wellbeing Service. In addition to other duties, the officer is our dedicated Promise lead and is responsible for ensuring the priorities and actions identified as part of #Keeping the Promise in Midlothian, are on track.

- **Long-term teams (0-12 and 12+)**

This team of social workers and children and families practitioners work with children who are at risk of becoming accommodated or are looked after at home or away from home and are assessed as requiring more intensive supports to remain or return to their birth or kin families. The team also works with children who require an alternative family arrangement out with their parents' care. The work of the team involves undertaking assessments, report writing for children's hearing, permanence panels and court and parenting capacity assessments. The teams manage all allocated cases via looked after processes including those who are in continuing care placements or after care. The teams also support a number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and manage cases for 16-18 year olds who have come into the justice system. Report writing for courts and children's hearings, and ensure that everyone is aware of their duties under corporate parenting.

- **Midlothian Housing Project**

This service is aligned with the long-term team and Care Experienced Young People/Continuing Care and After Care/Corporate Parenting and supports young people exiting the care system to live connected and fulfilling lives. The young people are supported by a holistic team to ensure that no care leaver becomes homeless. This project has been recognised nationally. There is also a dedicated worker who supports the asylum-seeking young people.

- **Family Group Decision Making Service**

This group of social workers and children and families practitioners provide a service that is founded on a right based approach. They will 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.

- **Two X Care Homes for Children and Young People**

Our local care homes offer care and support to children and young people aged 10-18 to ensure they remain within Midlothian, within their communities and close to family and friends. A recent inspection into the houses awarded grades of 5 (**Very Good**) and commented positively on their nurturing and trauma-informed approach. Recently, because of service demands, we have had to lower the age of children living within our care homes. That said, we firmly believe that our care homes should be seen as an alternative family environment.

- **Family Centred Care (Previously known as Family Placement Team) – Fostering/ Adoption/ Continuing Care**

These 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 them including kinship carers. This team offers a critical resource to children's services.

- **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 and 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 2023-34 actions going forward.

## **Midlothian's looked after children and young people**

As of March 2023, there were 174 looked after children in Midlothian. The breakdown is illustrated in the chart below. Our underpinning principle is that wherever 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 family 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.

<b>Looked after Population</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>174</b>	
At home with parents	29	14%
Friends and relatives	63	38%
Foster Carers	60	36%
Prospective adopters	6	3%
Residential, Schools & Secure	14	9%
<b>Aftercare/Continuing Care</b>	<b>204</b>	
Receiving Aftercare Services	64	31%
Continuing Care	120	59%
After Care/National Housing Project	20	10%

### **Hawthorn Family Learning Centre**

The centre undertook a full review of the service and recruited into all the posts. Whilst this was a significant piece of work the full implementation of the work has not happened due to both the manager and service manager being on maternity leave. A new temporary manager was recruited who has done a grand job of managing the centre and supporting staff during what has been a time of significant change. This said there has been an increased number of placements offered over the year compared to the past three years. Outings with children also increased significantly as did the number of food vouchers provided to families, a sign of the cost of living crisis impacting on families. The annual report highlights area of improvement over the coming year.

### **Young Carers**

We have worked alongside our Communities and Lifelong Learning colleagues to support 183+ young carers from the local community. A residential stay was offered as well as many group activities over the year. We have two dedicated workers in place to support young cares through an ongoing programme of work. We continue to identify and offer support all young carers.

# Key priority areas for 2023/24

## **Family Wellbeing Service**

Develop a service that is truly holistic in its support of families. To ensure children, young people and families can access support and resources when they require them. To work collaboratively with the voluntary and third sector identifying need and together bringing resources into meet that need. To ensure that we develop a service that is both creative and trauma informed in its approach. To ensure we can demonstrate that we are empowering families to find solutions through the support on offer. To support families through the cost-of-living crisis that is impacting on all families and some employees across Midlothian and beyond.

## **Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)**

This is an area of work that has grown exponentially over the past few years and an area of work that is becoming a concern for all local authorities across Scotland. As more and more young people are arriving within our local authorities who are required to be looked after in a safe environment, the pressures on all local authorities to meet the need is becoming unsustainable, with some local authorities having to purchase external placements for their UASC. In addition to this we have also had to create 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 meet their needs.

## **Foster Carer Recruitment**

There is a national shortage of foster carers across Scotland. Despite many attempts to find a national solution to date this has not been possible. Within Midlothian we very much value our foster carer community and wish to work with them to support our carers and to identify new carers within our ever growing population.

## **Workforce**

There is a national shortage of workers within social work across Scotland. Recruitment and retention of social workers in particular 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 land. This would benefit Midlothian who are in constant competition with Edinburgh salaries which are significantly greater than ours. We shall consider our salary scales over the coming year and shall ensure our workforce's wellbeing is a priority.

## **Single Point of Access**

Given the significant increase in referrals over the past few years, we need to better understand what is coming into the duty service and ensure referrals for our family wellbeing service are managed at a much earlier point of contact. Establishing a

single point of access for all services, education, social work and mental health is one of our ambitions for the coming year. This should prevent duplication and ensure that we managing all referrals swiftly and ensuring our data is accurate which in turn will influence our improvement journey going forward.

## **Transitions**

A key area of work for the next year is to develop a policy with adult services and education that ensures that all children who have additional support and complex needs are aware of a pathway that will allow for a good transition. This will improve the support we offer and help manage expectations of both families and officers. There needs to be agreed principles between services so that families have a good awareness and understanding of the process.

# 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 bases 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 are 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.

## **National Child Protection Guidance**

The new National Child Protection Guidance has been published. The national implementation group, of which Midlothian is part of, is responsible for implementing all the actions and ensuring these are progressed locally. We will be working towards reviewing and updating our local child protection procedures to ensure they reflect the national direction.

## **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 3<sup>rd</sup> 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 (Scotland) Act 2019 (ACRA) came into effect on 17 December 2021, which means the age of criminal responsibility has now been raised from 8 years of age to 12 years of age. The intention of this act and the proposed Children's Care and Justice Bill is to divert children and those under 18 from coming into contact 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. It is too early to determine what impact these changes will have on services though there will undoubtedly be an increase referrals into services. This Bill needs to consider the recent findings from the Children's Hearing Reform with over one hundred recommendations as well as the piece of work around Reimagining Secure Care so that we have a much more joined up approach to this area of work.

It is important to reiterate that notwithstanding the national and local demands and pressures, the impact of the current economic climate on children, families and communities is going to underpin the majority of work streams. Though not exhaustive, the above provides a summary of some of the key drivers.

## Children's Services Improvement Plan for 2023/24

GIRFEC Priority	More children and young people are safe, healthy and resilient							
Service Priority Actions	Performance Indicator	Due Date	Target	Baseline	Previous Trend Data	Managed By	Source	New indicator for 2023/24 yes or no
<b>1. Ensure the Midlothian Wellbeing Service is aligned with other family supports across Midlothian</b>	Ensure funding and resources are in place for 23/24	31/03/24	New Measure	22/23	22/23	Rebecca Hooton / Jo Foley	Internal Systems	No
	Implement a formal launch of service across Directorate	Jan'24	New Measure	0	0	Rebecca Hooton / Jo Foley	Internal Systems	Yes
	Develop process to understand family supports commissioned across Midlothian	31/12/23	New Measure	0	N/A	Joan Tranent	Internal Systems	Yes
<b>2. Promote the use of Self-Directed Support amongst families to empower them to have choice and flexibility.</b>	Increase by 10% the number of families who take Option 1 to organise their own support	31/03/24		22/23 figs		Lesley Watson/ Jo Foley	Internal Systems	No

GIRFEC Priority	More children and young people are safe, healthy and resilient							
Service Priority Actions	Performance Indicator	Due Date	Target	Baseline	Previous Trend Data	Managed By	Source	New indicator for 2023/24 yes or no
<b>3. Strengthen supports offered to Family Group Decision Making and Kinship supports to maintain children with birth/kin families</b>	Increase the number of families who participate in Family Group Decision Making	31/03/24	Increase 21/22 figs by 10%		22/23 data	Rebecca Hooton / Jo Foley	Internal Systems	Yes
	Increase the number of families who have a Family Group Decision Making plan	31/03/24	Increase by 10%	22/23 fig	22/23 data	Rebecca Hooton / Jo Foley	Internal Systems	Yes
	Increase the number of Kinship assessment undertaken	31/03/24	Increase by 50%	22/23 fig	22/23 data	Rebecca Hooton / Jo Foley	Internal Systems	Yes
	Develop permanence process to formally secure children in kinship	31/03/24	1 X clear policy (linked to perm. policy)	N/A	0	Rebecca Hooton / Jo Foley	Internal Systems	Yes
<b>5. implement the National Child Protection Guidance locally</b>	Contribute towards the development of Lothian wide Child Protection Procedures	31/03/24	Local procedure in place	N/A	N/A	All Service Manager/Jo Foley	Internal Systems	Yes

GIRFEC Priority	More children and young people are safe, healthy and resilient							
Service Priority Actions	Performance Indicator	Due Date	Target	Baseline	Previous Trend Data	Managed By	Source	New indicator for 2023/24 yes or no
7. Develop a pathway for children and families to navigate services in a timely manner	Develop a transition policy that supports children moving into adult services who have additional support needs	31/03/24	complete policy	N/A	N/A	J Tranent		Yes
	Develop a Single Point of Access Process across the directorate	31/03/24	New Measure	0	N/A	Joan Tranent	Internal systems	Yes
8. Strengthen mechanisms to support families maximise their income	Increase the number of families offered an income assessment	31/03/24	90	60	N/A	Lesley Watson/Jo Foley	Internal systems	No
9. Children, young people and their families experience high quality services	Ensure local Adoption Service will provide high quality care and support	31/03/24	Care inspection Grading of GOOD	New Measure	N/A	Jo Foley	CI inspection Grades	No
	Ensure local Fostering Service will provide high quality care and support	31/03/24	Care inspection Grading of GOOD	New Measure	N/A	Jo Foley	CI inspection Grades	No



GIRFEC Priority	More children and young people are safe, healthy and resilient							
Service Priority Actions	Performance Indicator	Due Date	Target	Baseline	Previous Trend Data	Managed By	Source	New indicator for 2023/24 yes or no
	Ensure local Continuing Care/Adult services will provide high quality care and support	31/03/24	Care inspection Grading of GOOD	New Measure	N/A	Jo Foley	CI inspection Grades	No
	Ensure Hawthorn Family Learning Centre will provide high quality care and support	31/03/24	Care inspection Grading of GOOD	New Measure	N/A (new service)	Jo Foley	CI inspection Grades	No
	Ensure 2 x Young People's Care Homes will provide high quality care and support	31/03/22	Care inspection Grading of GOOD	New Measure	N/A (new service)	Jo Foley/Lesley Watson	CI inspection Grades	Yes
<b>10. Strengthen the number staff who understand the importance of trauma informed practice</b>	Increase the number of staff trained in using a trauma informed approach	31/03/23	20	15	N/A	All Service Managers	Internal systems	Yes
	Develop a timetable of events that offer training opportunities and development for all CS staff	31.12.23				CO and Service Managers		Yes

GIRFEC Priority	More children and young people are safe, healthy and resilient							
Service Priority Actions	Performance Indicator	Due Date	Target	Baseline	Previous Trend Data	Managed By	Source	New indicator for 2023/24 yes or no
	Offer a range of activities and sessions that support staff wellbeing	31.3.24				CO and Service Managers		Yes