The time for promises has passed - the time for action is now

Friday 27 February, 2026

"We know what it feels like to wait too long for help, to feel invisible, and to fight for the care we need. Promises are not enough. Action is everything." *Young Health Rights Defender, speaking on the launch of Scotland's new children's health manifesto*

Scotland is failing too many of its children. Long waits, inconsistent care, and overstretched systems mean thousands of young people are not receiving the support they need to stay healthy, safe and well. Scotland is now at a crucial moment for children's health.

Scotland's new **Manifesto for Every Child's Right to Health** has been developed by young people, for young people. Launched by leading children's health rights charity Children's Health Scotland, the manifesto places the voices, experiences and priorities of Young Health Rights Defenders at its core — making it one of the strongest youth?led calls for change in children's health in Scotland today. Guided directly by their lived experiences of long waits, inconsistent care and overstretched systems, the Young Health Rights Defenders have shaped the principles, priorities and demands set out in the manifesto.

Commenting on the Manifesto, Helen Forrest, Chief Executive of Children's Health Scotland, said: *"This manifesto belongs to the children and young people who helped create it. Our role has simply been to listen, support and amplify their voices. They are calling for urgent, meaningful action — and Scotland must respond."*

Grounded in national evidence and the truth of young people's experiences, the Manifesto sets out clear, practical steps to ensure every child in Scotland receives the dignity, care and understanding they deserve.

The Manifesto call for FIVE key actions

The Manifesto asks leaders across Scotland to commit to:

1. Timely, equitable, rights?based care that prevents crisis rather than responds to it.
2. Trauma?informed services, especially for children facing poverty, adversity or disability.
3. Robust data and workforce planning to avoid future shortages and build sustainable capacity.
4. Meaningful participation of children, young people and families in shaping policy and practice.
5. Long?term investment in third sector organisations providing essential, early and preventative support.

Healthcare is under pressure and children are feeling the impact

The manifesto presents a picture of services under significant strain:

- **Over 42,000 children** were waiting for a neurodevelopmental assessment as of March 2025 — with rises of more than **500%** in some areas since 2020.
- **4,674 children and young people** were on CAMHS waiting lists at the end of March 2025.
- Nearly **49% of children waited more than 12 weeks** to see a paediatrician.
- **81% of social care organisations** reported recruitment challenges, making it harder to provide stable and consistent care.

Behind every statistic is a child who simply needs the right help at the right time. Long waits often increase the complexity of children's needs, meaning they may require more intensive interventions later. This is happening against a backdrop of reduced paediatric workforce capacity, fewer staffed paediatric beds, and specialist mental health services struggling to keep pace with demand.

These pressures create a cycle that is difficult for families and services alike — but it is also a cycle that Scotland can break.

The Human Stories Behind the Statistics

Children's experiences of health are never just medical they are emotional, social and practical too. Many children in Scotland are managing challenges that shape their daily lives:

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- **189,000 children** live with a chronic or long?standing health condition.
- **240,000 children**
  nearly **1 in 4** live in poverty, one of the strongest predictors of poor health, missed opportunities, and barriers to accessing care.

For many families, financial hardship and long-term conditions go hand-in-hand. Missed school, disrupted routines, increased caring responsibilities, and the stress of navigating complex systems all take a toll. There are 12,800 children in kinship families across Scotland, with over 66% in informal arrangements managing health needs without consistent support can feel particularly overwhelming.

Within this wider landscape, children's oral health has become a clear marker of system pressures. Dental care is often a child's most regular point of contact with health services, so when access breaks down, the effects ripple through daily life:

- Over **80,000 children** registered with NHS dentists have not seen one in five years.
- Waiting times for treatment can stretch beyond a year.
- Extractions under general anaesthetic remain the **most common elective reason for hospital admission** among children.

These issues are most severe in areas of highest deprivation, reinforcing the connection between poverty, delayed care, and poorer health outcomes. Oral health is not separate from children's wellbeing — it is part of the same pattern of unmet need affecting their comfort, confidence and learning.

As one 13?year?old Health Rights Defender said:

"Sometimes it feels like you have to wait until things get really bad before anyone helps you. That's not fair."

Young people told us repeatedly that delays affect their friendships, school life and sense of belonging. They want services that feel joined?up, compassionate and centred around their rights.

Care?Experienced Children Face Deep and Persistent Inequalities

The manifesto also highlights the challenges facing children in kinship, foster or residential care:**72% of children in care** have Additional Support Needs more than double the general population. They are twice as likely to have developmental concerns and more likely to require early, trauma?informed support.

Yet too often, their needs are addressed only at crisis points. As one young person shared: **"Sometimes there's no one who really understands what's going on with you — you just get passed around."**

A Moment for Leadership an Opportunity for Change

As Scotland marks the 20th year of GIRFEC, this is a moment not just to revisit its principles, but to fulfil its promise. GIRFEC was designed to ensure every child grows up loved, safe and respected and to give them every opportunity to realise their potential. That should be our expectation, not our aspiration.

Early support doesn't just transform childhoods — it leads to healthier adulthoods, stronger families and more resilient communities. Acting now helps children thrive today and strengthens Scotland's future.

As Michelle Wilson, Head of Children's Services for Children's Health Scotland, explains: *"Every day a child waits, they lose more than time. They lose opportunities, confidence, and sometimes hope. But we also know that when children get the right support early — when services join up, listen and respond — their lives can change incredibly quickly. Scotland has the talent, the compassion and the commitment to make that happen. If we start acting now, we can build a system that not only treats illness but truly nurtures every child's potential. "Article 24 of the UNCRC sets out every child's right to the highest attainable standard of health and with the right focus and investment, Scotland can turn that right into something every child genuinely experiences."*

That's the Scotland our children deserve, and it's within reach."

The Health Rights Defenders are ready to meet with policymakers, sector leaders and national bodies to ensure children's voices guide Scotland's decisions.

The full manifesto is available at:

Physical copies can also be requested.

If you have questions or would like to get involved, email:

CYPHRS@childrenshealthscotland.org

The time for promises has passed. Now is the time to act — so every child in Scotland grows up with the health, support and dignity they deserve.

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