

# **Early Child Development Transformational Change Programme**

**November 2023**

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## Introduction

“Investing in the early years is one of the smartest investments a country can make to break the cycle of poverty, address inequality, and boost productivity later in life. Today, millions of young children are not reaching their full potential because of inadequate nutrition, lack of early stimulation and learning, and exposure to stress. Investments in the physical, mental, and emotional development of children - from before birth until they enter primary school are critical for the future productivity of individuals and for the economic competitiveness of nations.” (The World Bank)

We are renewing our focus on improving early child development by bringing together a programme of work to:

- provide oversight and better integration of the policies that contribute to early child development with a focus on prevention.
- re-emphasise the importance of pre-birth and early years across all policy areas.
- identify any policy and implementation gaps, informed by current evidence (including what is needed pre-conception) and build collaboration across the whole system to address them.

## What we mean by early child development

This work is focused on what happens during the period from pre-birth to three, when the brain and metabolic and immune systems develop fastest, laying the foundations for life. Evidence shows the 4 things that are needed for babies and young children to develop are:

- sensitive responsive caregiving
- play and stimulation
- nutrition and health
- safe from harm

It is ultimately about making sure our knowledge of the science of what is needed for healthy development is translated into policy, service delivery and culture in Scotland. These short videos provide helpful illustration of the evidence:

- [Partnerships in Early Childhood, Saving Brains](#) (9 minute video)
- [How Early Childhood Experiences Affect Lifelong Health and Learning](#) (5 minute video)
- [Building Adult Capabilities to Improve Child Outcomes: A Theory of Change - YouTube](#) (5 minute video)

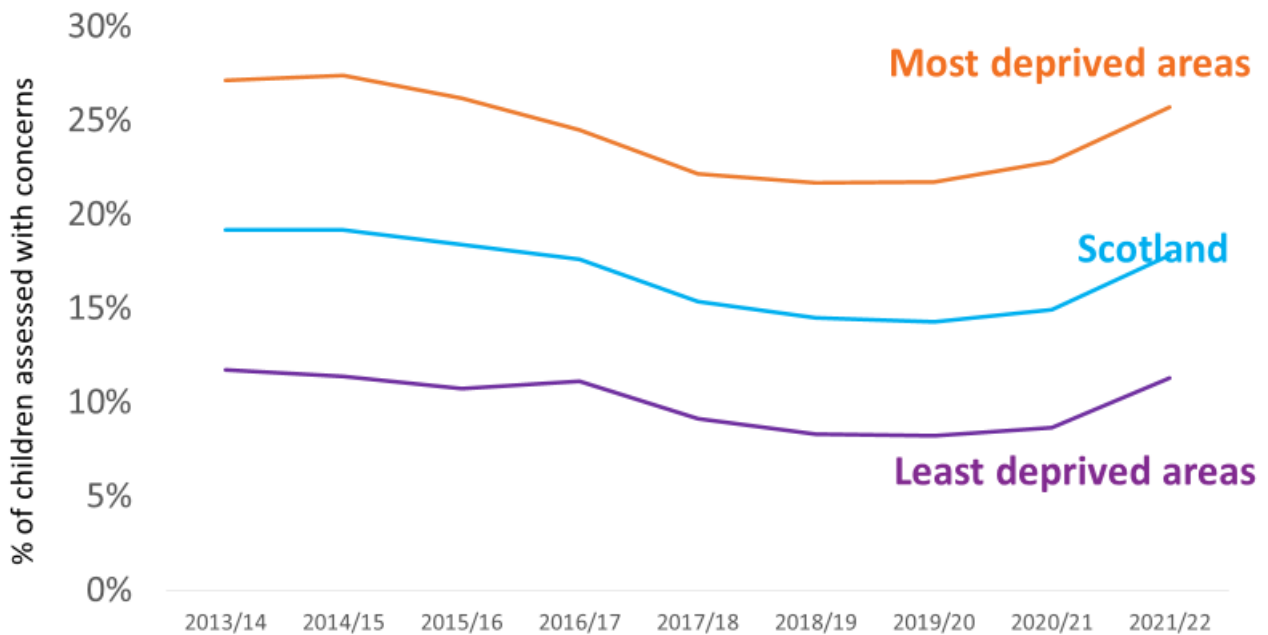
## Why we are doing this

We know that what children experience during their early years and parents' capacity to provide nurturing care lays lifelong foundations for health and life skills. We already

invest in a range of evidence-based services and resources to support families and child development from pre-birth.

We are acting to address the increasing numbers of developmental concerns. As a priority, we need to tackle the inequalities in developmental concerns at 27-30 months, as children in our poorest areas are more likely to have concerns than those in more affluent areas.

## Development Concerns at 27-30 month review



[\(Early child development statistics - Scotland 2021 to 2022 - Early child development – Publications - Public Health Scotland\)](#)

These inequalities often last throughout people’s lives resulting in poorer overall health, worse educational outcomes, more involvement in the criminal justice system, and less participation in the economy and therefore more chance of being in poverty than if we got it right from the start.

These outcomes affect not only individuals but also public expenditure on the repercussions of systems that don’t provide the support that families need, and therefore our overall success as a society.

### What is new

We have been aware of the importance of the early years and prevention for many years, and we need to build on the good work that is going on around Scotland. The evidence base continues to grow, and our understanding of implications of healthy child development for the long-term impacts on the brain and the body are increasing. This makes it vital that we develop knowledge and adapt policy and practice across Scotland to ensure we are bringing together policy initiatives around the individual, aligning and streamlining governance and practice and delivering the best outcomes to achieve healthy child development by working with delivery partners, communities and families.

## What we are doing

The programme is underpinned by the [Quality Improvement journey](#). We have been taking time to understand the current evidence base, and learning from previous change programmes. We are engaging with a range of stakeholders to understand what is needed. We are building on work with local partners, to identify implementation gaps and opportunities to test new ways of getting evidence in to practice reliably and consistently.

Everyone needs to be aware of the science and importance of early child development, so that all policies support our society to create the right environments for children to flourish.

We have identified a range of current strategies, programmes, legislation, services, guidance and advice that relate to early child development. This is helping us to:

- propose which core policies and programmes impacting on how children grow and develop, or on how parents support this, should be incorporated into a portfolio approach.
- align governance, identify and report on the measures and delivery milestones to provide a more complete picture of progress, and build more cohesion between them including seeking any opportunities for integration while strengthening the impact.
- assess policies against the international evidence to identify any policy gaps or areas for improvement, with a particular focus on the [World Health Organisation's Nurturing Care Framework](#).
- provide a foundation for work with service users and staff to further understand and address barriers to implementation, and identify opportunities to spread innovation.

## Theory of Change

Based on an in-depth review of the evidence on what is needed to improve early child development, and a range of knowledge and experience of the current system, we have developed a high-level theory of change which identifies the areas we need to address. As we learn more, this theory can be refined further.

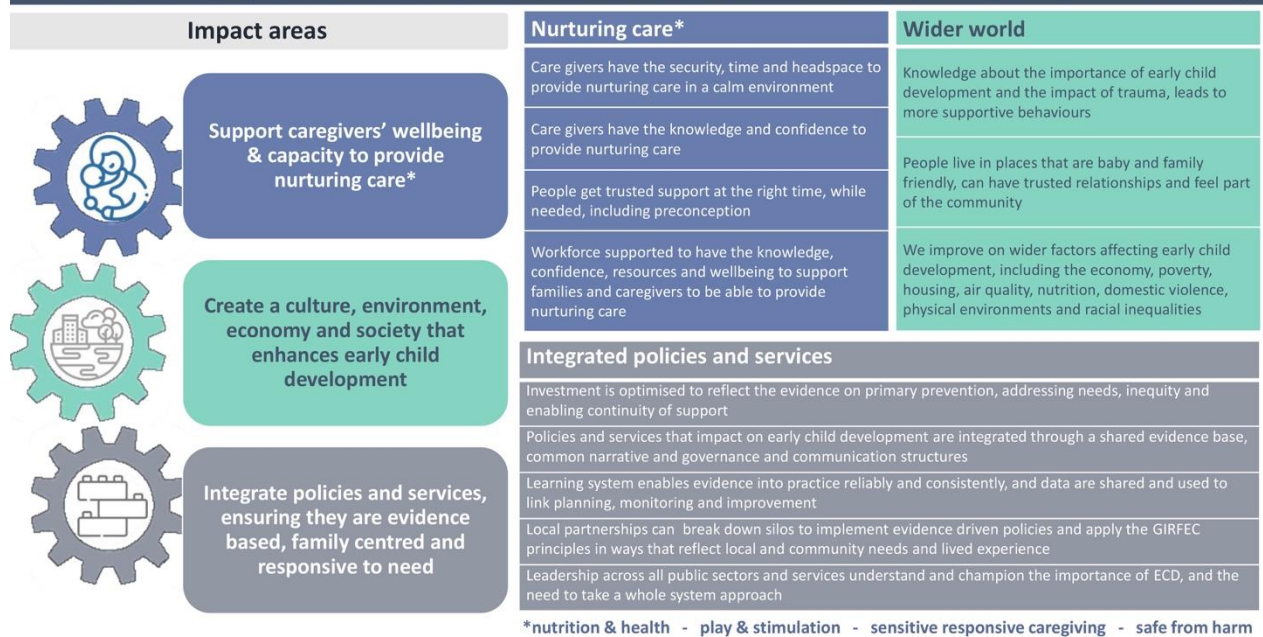
If Scotland can make improvements as described in the theory of change we believe a realistic improvement aim is that; we reduce the proportion of children with developmental concerns identified at 27-30 month review by a quarter by 2030 (from 18% to 13.5%). Reducing the proportion by a quarter would result in the lowest levels seen since Public Health Scotland started measuring. Note that child health reviews are designed to pick up concerns so that children can get the support they need, and we would not want to jeopardise this by setting the aim too low.

To achieve this aim, we want to see a reduction in the gap between the most and least deprived areas, and will also track this as one of our programme indicators. Scotland's policies are globally recognised on many aspects but that is not translating into improved outcomes for all, so we need to further understand what else needs to be

done, what can be done better or more reliably and consistently, and what would result in most impact.

From before they are born, all babies and young children experience the nurturing care they need to develop to their full potential

**Aim: To reduce the proportion of children with developmental concerns at 27-30 months by a quarter by 2030 (from 18% to 13.5%)**



Three key impact areas have been identified below.

Supporting caregivers' wellbeing and capacity to provide nurturing care (nutrition and health, play and stimulation, sensitive responsive caregiving and safe from harm):

- caregivers have the security, time and headspace to provide nurturing care in a calm environment.
- care givers have the knowledge and confidence to provide nurturing care
- people get trusted support at the right time while needed, including preconception.
- workforce supported to have the knowledge, confidence, resources and wellbeing to support families and caregivers to be able to provide nurturing care.

Create a culture, environment, economy and society that enhances early child development:

- knowledge about the importance of early childhood development and the impact of trauma, leads to more supportive behaviours.
- people live in places that are baby and family friendly, can have trusted relationships and feel part of the community.
- we improve on wider factors affecting early child development, including the economy, poverty, housing, air quality, nutrition, domestic violence, physical environments and racial inequalities.

Integrated policies and services ensuring they are evidence based, family centred and responsive to need:

- investment is optimised to reflect the evidence on primary intervention, addressing needs, inequality and enabling continuity of support.
- policies and services that impact on early child development are integrated through a shared evidenced base, common narrative and governance and communication structures.
- learning system enabled evidence into proactive reliably and consistently, and data are shared and used to link planning, monitoring and improvement.
- local partnerships can break down silos to implement evidence driven policies and apply the GIRFEC principles in ways that reflect local and community needs and lived experience.
- leadership across all public sectors and services understand and champion the importance of Early Childhood Development and the need to take a whole system approach.

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