Priorities for Action: What's Feasible Now

Briefing 4 of 4 from the series: Joining Up Services for Children in Glasgow — Public Service Reform, Integration and Productivity in Children's Services in Scotland

Authors:
Katherine Long
University of Glasgow
Bridgette Wessels
University of Glasgow
Des McNulty
Glasgow Caledonian University

Date:
October 2026

The Productivity Institute
Scotland Productivity Forum Paper 2026

Authors' contacts:
Katherine.Long@glasgow.ac.uk

Copyright
© K. Long, B. Wessels, D. McNulty (2026)

Suggested citation

K. Long, B. Wessels, D. McNulty (2026) *Priorities for Action: What's Feasible Now*. Scotland Productivity Forum Paper, The Productivity Institute.

The Productivity Institute is an organisation that works across academia, business and policy to better understand, measure and enable productivity across the UK. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/V002740/1).

The Productivity Institute is headquartered at Alliance Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester, Booth Street West, Manchester, M15 6PB. More information can be found on The Productivity Institute's website. Contact us at theproductivityinstitute@manchester.ac.uk

Purpose

This is the final of four briefing papers, developed from the Productivity Institute Insights Project *Joining Up Services for Children in Glasgow*. The paper sets out a series of refined and prioritised recommendations for improving collaboration in children's services in Scotland by assessing what is realistically achievable in the current policy and financial context.

It is written for decision-makers with budget and commissioning authority — local authority chief executives and directors, Health and Social Care Partnership chief officers, COSLA, and relevant Scottish Government policy teams. Where Briefings 1–3 set out conceptual argument, policy context and a measurement framework, this briefing addresses the current fiscal and political environment, presenting recommendations achievable in the current context, and recommendations to be made as a part of longer-term ambition.

Introduction

The recommendations set out in this paper sit contextually developed within a rapidly evolving policy landscape. Significant developments in public service reform, government policy and the wider fiscal environment mean collaborative approaches to improving outcomes for children and families must be reviewed in a timely manner. Increasing pressure on public finances has intensified the need to demonstrate not only what should be done, but what can realistically be delivered through existing systems and resources. Key developments affect implementation, such as the Scottish Government's Public Service Reform agenda, the policy commitments emerging from the 2026 Scottish Parliament election as well as approaches to address child poverty (Scottish Government, 2025). Against this backdrop, recommendations have been reviewed and prioritised according to their practicality, affordability and alignment with existing statutory duties and governance arrangements.

The paper identifies four actions that can be implemented immediately using existing structures, duties, and funding streams, rather than requiring new legislation, funding, or staffing. These focus on:

- Influencing the child poverty target review.
- Using existing Children's Services Planning processes to strengthen collaboration.
- Embedding meaningful participation and co-production within current statutory and non-statutory planning arrangements.
- Integrating learning from existing evaluations into local planning processes.

By focusing first on opportunities that can be progressed through existing structures, partnerships can build evidence, demonstrate value and strengthen the case for future investment and reform.

Context updates

Scotland's initial Public Service Reform Strategy, published in June 2025, commits to reducing identified costs on Scottish Government and public body spend on corporate functions by 20 per cent over five years — an annual saving of approximately £1 billion by 2029–30 — alongside returning the public sector workforce broadly to pre-Covid levels (Scottish Government, 2025). Recommendations that depend on new posts, new funding streams, or protected non-frontline staff time need to be judged against this backdrop explicitly, not treated as though collaboration funding sits outside the wider savings requirement.

The Cabinet Secretary's statement of 18 June 2026, subsequently reaffirmed in September 2026, confirmed that the Scottish Government will review the types of targets used to measure progress on

child poverty, explicitly seeking measures that capture systemic and preventative value rather than income measures alone (Scottish Parliament, 2026a). This is significant because it creates a policy opportunity to demonstrate how collaboration, service integration and relational approaches contribute to improved outcomes for children and families. Alongside the review, recent government commitments, including investment in locally delivered neurodevelopmental support and the Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan's emphasis on prevention, community-based provision and cross-sector working, signal a broader shift towards approaches that depend on effective collaboration across services (Scottish Government, 2026, Scottish Government and COSLA, 2026).

This direction is reinforced by *A Fairer, Healthier Scotland: The Collaboration for Health Equity* report, which argues that reducing inequalities requires sustained place-based, collaborative and preventative action (Marmot et al., 2026). While highlighting the importance of partnership working, community participation and action on the wider determinants of health, the report also identifies the practical barriers that continue to constrain collaborative practice, including fragmented funding arrangements, short-term funding cycles and pressures on third-sector capacity. Together, these developments strengthen the case for moving beyond aspirations for collaboration towards more robust ways of understanding, supporting and measuring collaborative capacity.

In this context, the collaborative capacity and relational productivity indicators developed in Briefings 1 and 3 have particular policy relevance. The current review of child poverty targets provides a near-term opportunity to demonstrate how these measures can capture forms of value that conventional outcome indicators often overlook. The recommendations that follow are therefore framed not as longer-term ambitions, but as practical actions that can engage directly with current policy priorities and decision-making processes.

Actionable Recommendations

The following four recommendations were selected as each can be actioned using structures, duties or funding streams that already exist, without requiring new posts, new standing funding commitments, or new legislation.

Develop a collaborative capacity framework to the child poverty target-types review

The Scottish Government's review of child poverty target types, confirmed on 18 June 2026, is actively seeking measures capable of capturing systemic and preventative value. The collaborative capacity scorecard and relational productivity indicators set out in Briefing 3 should be submitted as evidence to that review directly, positioned specifically for children's services. This costs officer time only, has a defined and imminent audience, and directly serves the review's stated purpose.

Embed a collaborative capacity framework in Children's Services Planning cycles already rather than creating a parallel process

Rather than establishing a new national collaborative capacity framework, partnerships should be encouraged to apply the Briefing 3 scorecard within their existing statutory Children's Services Plan review cycle. Given that the Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act now extends this duty to Integrated Joint Boards, this is the natural, mandated vehicle for aligning Health and Social Care Partnership and Children's Services Planning governance — addressing the coordination gap identified in Briefing 2 without creating new statutory machinery (Scottish Parliament, 2026b).

Embed family and child participation within planning processes

Children's Services plans, Integrated Joint Board strategic plans and Fairer Futures Partnership design processes are all already required to consult and involve the people they serve. Strengthening the quality of that involvement — moving it from consultation toward genuine co-production, as Briefing

1 argues — is a change in practice and expectation, not a new structure requiring new funding. This should be an explicit expectation set through existing statutory guidance rather than a new initiative.

Draw evaluation lessons from local evidence, using the Fairer Futures Partnerships and the Child Poverty Practice Accelerator Fund into Children's Services Planning

Both programmes are already funded, currently being evaluated, and operating in Glasgow. Evaluation findings on referral pathways, multi-agency collaboration and streamlined access to support should be formally routed into local Children's Services planning review cycles rather than remaining siloed within the poverty-policy evaluation stream. This is a data and process change, not a funding commitment.

Further Ambition: Contingent on Future Resourcing

Longer-term ambitions are contingent on spending decisions that are unable to be guaranteed currently. However, future recommendations are proposed to be considered in later budget rounds.

- Dedicated, multi-year collaboration funding streams for joint commissioning, cross-sector innovation and place-based interventions.
- New boundary-spanning coordinator or partnership facilitation posts within local partnerships.
- Protected, resourced time for collaborative working and relationship-building, distinct from existing caseloads.
- A national Scottish Collaborative Capacity Framework for Children's Services, building on Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) and the Public Service Reform Strategy.

Each of these should be framed explicitly using the evidence generated through the actions in Section 3 — which will, if pursued, provide a stronger evidence base.

Sequencing

Of the four feasible actions, submitting evidence to the child poverty target-types review (3.1) is the most time-limited and should be actioned first, since the review is already under way. Strengthening participation (3.2) and routing evaluation evidence into planning (3.3) are continuous practice changes that can begin alongside the other two without sequencing constraints. Finally, aligning governance through Children's Services Planning cycles (3.4) may then feed into future planning development.

Concluding Remarks

Improving collaboration in children’s services does not require waiting for new legislation, new funding streams or structural reform. The current policy environment presents clear opportunities to strengthen collaborative practice using existing duties, governance arrangements and planning processes. At a time when public service reform is being driven as much by fiscal constraint as by aspirations for integration, the greatest value lies in focusing on actions that are practical, affordable and capable of demonstrating impact.

The four actionable recommendations outlined in this briefing provide a realistic pathway for embedding collaborative and relational approaches within existing systems. By influencing the child poverty target review, strengthening the role of Children’s Services Planning, embedding meaningful participation, and ensuring that learning from current initiatives informs future planning, partnerships

can build a stronger evidence base for what effective collaboration looks like and what it achieves for children and families.

While longer-term ambitions remain important, future investment will be more compelling if supported by evidence generated through actions that can be taken now. Progress therefore depends not on creating additional structures, but on making better use of those already in place. By prioritising achievable changes in the short term, Scotland's children's services can strengthen collaboration, improve outcomes, and build the case for more ambitious reform in the years ahead.

References

Marmot, M., Allen, J., Goldblatt, P. and Viles, B. (2026) *A Fairer, Healthier Scotland: The Collaboration for Health Equity*. London: UCL Institute of Health Equity. Available at: https://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/a-fairer-healthier-scotland-the-collaboration-for-health-equity-final-report (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

Scottish Government and COSLA (2026) *Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan (Accessed: 23 October 2026)

Scottish Government (2025) Scotland's Public Service Reform Strategy: Delivering for Scotland. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-public-service-reform-strategy-delivering-scotland/ (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

Scottish Government (2026) *Children and Young People's Neurodevelopment Support Fund 2026-27: Supporting Guidance*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available at: Children and Young People's Neurodevelopment Support Fund 2026-27 Supporting Guidance (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

Scottish Parliament (2026a) Ministerial Statement: Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan – Annual Progress Report 2025–26, 18 June 2026. Edinburgh: Scottish Parliament. Available at: https://www.scottishparliament.tv/meeting/ministerial-statement-tackling-child-poverty-delivery-plan-annual-progress-report-2025-26-june-18-2026 (Accessed: 23 October 2026).

Scottish Parliament (2026b) *Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 (asp 16)*. London: The National Archives. Available at: Children (Care, Care Experience and Services Planning) (Scotland) Act 2026 (Accessed: 23 October 2026