

Joining up Services for Children in Glasgow: Exploring New Models of Collaboration and Integration

Evaluation of Strategic and Ecological Integration in Scottish Policy, Guidance and Actions; Recommendations for Delivering Public Service Reform Workstreams

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Purpose

This rapid assessment of existing policy explores the extent to which policy displays evidence of integration, collaboration and joined-up approaches to service delivery in Scotland, particularly services that support children with early developmental impairment and disabilities in early years. The review maps out policy considered essentially relevant to the delivery of children's services and extends to secondary or influencing key interest areas relating to children's services and multi-sector integration and collaboration, considering fundamental influencing factors that impact successful integrated collaboration identified in the narrative literature review and in scoping activities in the Glasgow South Central area. The review concludes that policy design and delivery are connected in some areas of integration such as health and social care, but also appear fragmented and siloed in areas that are crucial to the fully integrated and collaborative notion of joined up services. There is a need for increased involvement and inclusion of both wider sector policies that are intrinsically connected to providing high-quality joined up services for children with disabilities, and consideration of integration with policies that deliver on wider influencing factors that impact how communities access services; particularly communities in poverty, and those experiencing limited access to support due to language and other cultural barriers. Sustained multi-sector integration and collaboration in practice requires a multi-dimensional, relational approach that fosters cohesion across structures and systems. If this is to succeed, policies, plans and strategic guidance should be designed and delivered in the same way.

Introduction

Children's disability services in the public, voluntary, and independent sector are seeing an increase in demand for support from families; and in Glasgow South, specifically for children living with learning disabilities and early developmental impairment. Over 4 in 10 children in Scottish schools currently require additional learning support, up from 1 in 10 in 2010 (Scottish Government, 2025). Children are growing up in Scotland living with persistent inequalities such as early developmental impairment, coupled with complex social barriers like deep poverty, language barriers and restricted access to support. Demand for public services is increasing in tandem with demand for Scottish public service reform, which has seen some public services facing financial hardships, shortages of staff, and restriction of resources. Integration and joining up of services have become common topics in children's policy dialogue in the last 20 years (Warin, 2007), and in this time Scotland has published and established various policies that seek to better the wellbeing and health of children and families.

The Scottish Government holds devolved responsibility for the design and delivery of policy in matters involving health and social care services, education and training, housing, justice and policing, and some aspects of equality legislation. Reserved matters, decided by the UK government include policy on most aspects of equality legislation, and all immigration, asylum & visas and data protection policy (Scottish Parliament, 2026a). The delivery of public service reform is exclusively managed by the Scottish government, and focuses on empowering staff, focusing on prevention in the future of public service development, and

shift away from the preservation of existing structures where they do not serve the goal of delivering excellent and sustainable public services (Scottish Parliament, 2026b).

This review seeks to map out existing Scottish devolved policy that details actions to improve the design and delivery of services and support provided to children and families and explore the extent to which integrated design is present. Evidence of strategic integration, where policies are intentionally designed as part of a coordinated response alongside related policy programmes, actions, funding streams and delivery mechanisms, and ecological integration, where policies are designed with an awareness of the interacting social, economic and structural factors that shape people's experiences and outcomes, will be evaluated. The topic of public service reform is central to the current delivery of multi-sector children's services, and policies containing reference to public service design and delivery will be considered. Complex social barriers and intersecting inequalities are intrinsically connected to the way in which services are accessed and can influence largely the delivery and receipt of support. Taking a whole-systems approach, this review will map out policy that covers social factors that impact service delivery, and policy that is likely to impact the way in which services are accessed by communities experiencing intersecting inequalities, to explore whether actions contain reference to the complexities of delivering services in this context. Once existing relevant policies and actions are mapped, evidence will be reviewed to assess whether policy and actions are supporting, representative and concurrent with existing depictions of good collaboration and integration – both across policy and alignment of concepts, strategy and goals, and across services in systems, delivery and practice.

Methodology

A rapid assessment of Scottish policy was conducted to explore how existing policy frameworks represent and address issues relating to multi-sector service integration, support for children with early developmental impairment, and the structural and contextual factors associated with effective collaborative practice. The review framework was developed through an initial scoping phase comprising community partner consultations and a targeted review of relevant literature and evidence. This process identified a series of emerging thematic areas and analytical categories, which were subsequently used to guide policy identification, selection and analysis. The resulting review examined the extent to which these themes were reflected within current policy approaches to the planning, delivery and integration of services for children and families.

These areas are as follows:

Thematic Area	Analytical Categories
Vulnerable Communities	• Children and Young People • Migration and Migrant Communities

Inclusion and Equity	• Poverty • Disability and Early Developmental Impairment • Equalities, Inclusion and Human Rights
Public Service Delivery	• Early Years and Primary Education • Health and Social Care Integration
Service Design and Reform	• Local Government, Community and Place-Based Reform • Public Service Design and Reform

The following Scottish policies were expected to or contained references to thematic areas and analytical categories, and as such were reviewed:

Policy Area	
Asylum and Refugees Policy (Scottish Government, 2026a)	Improving Public Services Policy (Scottish Government, 2026j)
Child Protection Policy (Scottish Government, 2026b)	Poverty and Social Justice Policy (Scottish Government, 2026k)
Community Empowerment Policy (Scottish Government, 2026c)	Primary Care Services Policy (Scottish Government, 2026l)
Digital Policy (Scottish Government, 2026d)	Regeneration Policy (Scottish Government, 2026m)
Disabled People Policy (Scottish Government, 2026e)	Schools Policy Policy (Scottish Government, 2026n)
Early Education and Care Policy (Scottish Government, 2026f)	Social Care Policy (Scottish Government, 2026o)
GIRFEC Policy (Scottish Government, 2026g)	Third Sector Policy (Scottish Government, 2026p)
Health Workforce Policy (Scottish Government, 2026h)	Maternal and Child Health; Universal Health Visiting Service Policy (Scottish Government, 2026q)
Human Rights Policy (Scottish Government, 2026i)	

Summary of Policy Findings

Policy Alignment Matrix

Key	
Strong evidence	Clear and substantial evidence of reference to the category
Partial evidence	Some evidence of reference but limited / unexplained coverage
No evidence	No evidence of reference to theme or category

Thematic area		Vulnerable Communities		Inclusion & Equity			Public Service Delivery			Service Design and Reform		
Policy Title	Analytic category	Children & Young People	Migrant Communities	Disability & EDI	Poverty	Equalities & Human Rights	Early Years & Primary Education	Health & Social Care Integration	Third Sector Services	Community & Place-Based Reform	Public Service Design & Reform	Notes on partial evidence
Third Sector												Local/community organisations not explicitly referenced but inferred.

Thematic area		Vulnerable Communities		Inclusion & Equity			Public Service Delivery			Service Design and Reform		
Policy Title	Analytic category	Children & Young People	Migrant Communities	Disability & EDI	Poverty	Equalities & Human Rights	Early Years & Primary Education	Health & Social Care Integration	Third Sector Services	Community & Place-Based Reform	Public Service Design & Reform	Notes on partial evidence
Child Protection												
Asylum and Refugees												References mainly relate to unaccompanied children only; limited evidence of rights-enabling actions.
Disabled People												Bills, legislation and payment schemes reference support for children but no measurable policy actions listed. Autism and learning disability nested within Mental Health Policy.

Thematic area		Vulnerable Communities		Inclusion & Equity			Public Service Delivery			Service Design and Reform		
Policy Title	Analytic category	Children & Young People	Migrant Communities	Disability & EDI	Poverty	Equalities & Human Rights	Early Years & Primary Education	Health & Social Care Integration	Third Sector Services	Community & Place-Based Reform	Public Service Design & Reform	Notes on partial evidence
Poverty and Social Justice												Tackling Child Poverty Plan 2026-2031 actions include expanding access to childcare.
Human Rights												Human Rights bill not yet passed will introduce international rights convention for people with disabilities.
Early Education and Care												Some evidence gaps regarding recent early years data, lack of timely updates
Maternal and Child Health - Universal Health Visiting Service												Refers to specialised focus on vulnerable families – namely for children with

Thematic area		Vulnerable Communities		Inclusion & Equity			Public Service Delivery			Service Design and Reform		
Policy Title	Analytic category	Children & Young People	Migrant Communities	Disability & EDI	Poverty	Equalities & Human Rights	Early Years & Primary Education	Health & Social Care Integration	Third Sector Services	Community & Place-Based Reform	Public Service Design & Reform	Notes on partial evidence
												disabilities and social disadvantage. Clear pathway links from health visiting to school nursing service but evidence of planned collaboration is weak. No mention of early years care.
GIRFEC												Some mention to primary education, no mention to early years education
Schools												Human rights linked indirectly through GIRFEC; no direct reference to rights-based curriculum

Thematic area		Vulnerable Communities		Inclusion & Equity			Public Service Delivery			Service Design and Reform		
Policy Title	Analytic category	Children & Young People	Migrant Communities	Disability & EDI	Poverty	Equalities & Human Rights	Early Years & Primary Education	Health & Social Care Integration	Third Sector Services	Community & Place-Based Reform	Public Service Design & Reform	Notes on partial evidence
												design. No mention of Early Years education, and transition support.
Health Workforce												
Social Care												Reference to carers may include young carers but is not explicit. National Care Service no longer being delivered, third sector collaboration mentioned therefore null. Brief mention of third sector representatives in Carers Rights Steering Group and SDS; no mention in integration.

Results Analysis

Policy areas with alignment to highest number of categories, suggesting strategic integration/coordination	Policy areas with alignment to fewest number of categories, suggesting siloed working
Schools & Early Education and Care	Third Sector
Poverty and Social Justice	Health workforce
Community Empowerment	Social Care
Primary Care Services	Regeneration
GIRFEC	Child & Maternal Health: Universal Health Visiting Services

Introduction to Strategic and Ecological Integration

This review identified two distinct ways in which policy can be integrated. The first is strategic integration, where policies are intentionally designed as part of a coordinated response alongside related policy programmes, actions, funding streams and delivery mechanisms. The second is ecological integration, where policies are designed with an awareness of the interacting social, economic and structural factors that shape people's experiences and outcomes. Under this approach, policy responses recognise the interconnected nature of issues such as poverty, disability, migration, digital exclusion and human rights, and seek to address these through coordinated action.

Strategic Integration Findings

The review first examined evidence of strategic integration across policy areas. Some evidence of coordinated policy design was identified, most consistently within policy areas supported by established and multidimensional frameworks for delivery, particularly GIRFEC. The scale and longevity of GIRFEC's implementation has created a common language, shared principles and expectations for multi-agency working across children's services. As a result, children's services within health and education demonstrated the strongest evidence of considering related policy implementation and adopting joined-up approaches to service design and delivery. This finding concerns the strategic alignment visible in policy text; it should be read alongside Audit Scotland's (2018, 2026) recurring findings that formal health and social care integration structures have not, over a decade of monitoring, translated fully into integrated financial planning or improved capacity to meet rising demand.

While School Policy scored highest in alignment with categories of interest, no evidence was identified of a specific focus on linking in or joining up with early years education, despite its potential importance in supporting effective transitions between services and stages of

educational development. Similarly, the policy makes no reference to health and social care, integration or cross-sector collaboration. This represents a missed opportunity to strengthen coordinated care pathways and promote more integrated support across services involved in children's wellbeing.

Alongside this, policy actions within Poverty and Social displayed some evidence of strategic coordination with children's policy, though much of this evidence reflects stated intent rather than demonstrated delivery. The Tackling Child Poverty Plans, Fairer Scotland Duty, and most notably, the Fairer Futures Partnerships Programme, demonstrate explicit links between policy ambitions and delivery mechanisms. Early evaluation evidence associates this programme with improved referral pathways and stronger multi-agency collaboration, suggesting that ecological, place-based integration is achievable in practice even where it is not yet visible in the general policy architecture reviewed.

Some mention of cross-sector collaboration is present in the Poverty and Social Justice policy, but this lies mostly within the Tackling Child Poverty Plan 2026-2031, and is listed as intention, not current coordination evidence. There was also evidence of intentions to strengthen collaboration with the third sector through initiatives such as the Whole Family Support Third Sector Delivery Fund. These examples demonstrate some strategic coordination and recognition of wider influences on family wellbeing, yet funding should not be conflated to collaboration.

Early Education and Care policy also demonstrated some commitment to supporting third sector organisations through linking the Just Enterprise programme, which provides training and organisational support to third sector providers. However, while investment and support mechanisms indicate recognition of the third sector's contribution, these should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of integrated policy design. Financial support alone does not demonstrate coordination, shared governance, or collaborative service planning.

Outside poverty and early years policy, evidence suggests a substantial gap in the integration of third sector services within wider public service reform agendas. Scotland's Public Service Reform Strategy (2025) recognises the third sector as an important delivery partner and outlines intentions to improve local service integration in Workstream 9. However, the strategy provides limited detail regarding how third sector organisations will be incorporated into planning, governance and decision-making arrangements. As a result, the third sector continues to appear more prominently within discussions of delivery than within the design of integrated systems.

Ecological Integration Findings

While examples of strategic alignment exist, evidence of ecological integration was considerably weaker across the policy landscape. Policies frequently acknowledge individual dimensions of disadvantage, including poverty, disability, human rights and community disadvantage. However, there is limited evidence that policy actions are systematically

designed around the cumulative and interacting effects of these factors on people's access to services and outcomes. This distinction mirrors intersectionality-based approaches to policy analysis (Hankivsky, 2012), which hold that policies designed around single dimensions of disadvantage in isolation will systematically fail to capture the compounded barriers experienced by people affected by more than one form of structural inequality at once.

For example, links were identified between health and social care integration and poverty reduction, while schools policy demonstrated alignment with disability and wellbeing frameworks through GIRFEC and Equalities and Human Rights commitments. However, there was little evidence of coordinated policy responses that explicitly address the intersecting experiences of children and young people affected simultaneously by poverty, disability, migration status and digital exclusion. Policies where a more ecological approach could have significant impact include Disabled People, Early Education and Care, Social Care and Digital.

Migration and Inclusion

One of the clearest evidence gaps identified through the review concerns the integration of migration and refugee support within mainstream children's service policy. Although migration policy contains references to education, these are confined to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. No corresponding commitment was identified within Schools policy to supporting migrant children and families more broadly.

Migration and refugee support therefore appears to operate primarily as a distinct policy domain rather than being fully integrated into wider planning for children's wellbeing. As a result, policies may not adequately reflect the realities experienced by families facing multiple forms of disadvantage simultaneously, including poverty, disability, language barriers, cultural barriers and social exclusion.

The limited attention given to migrant communities within Schools, Social Care, Community Empowerment and Digital policy suggests a significant missed opportunity for coordinated policy development. Greater integration of migration considerations into mainstream service planning would help ensure that support needs are considered more holistically across education, health, social care and community services.

Place-Based and Community Approaches

Community Empowerment, Regeneration and Improving Public Services policies place considerable emphasis on community participation, place-based delivery and partnership working. Collectively, these policy areas promote collaboration across traditional organisational boundaries and seek to increase local involvement in shaping services.

However, while the rhetoric of partnership working is strong, evidence of integrated collaborative governance is less apparent. Within regeneration policy, collaboration is

primarily framed as a mechanism for addressing poverty and improving socio-economic outcomes. Meanwhile, references to children and young people remain relatively limited, with the most notable example being the Children and Young People's Improvement Collaborative within the Improving Public Services agenda.

There is similarly limited evidence that place-based approaches are designed to address the overlapping effects of disability, migration, poverty and digital exclusion. This is a significant omission given the ways in which these dimensions of disadvantage frequently intersect within local communities and shape access to support. Place-based reform has the potential to move beyond geographic coordination towards more holistic models of public service delivery, but this would require a more explicit commitment to addressing intersecting forms of inequality within local planning frameworks.

Including the Third Sector in Public Service Reform

The review found limited evidence of meaningful third sector integration across the majority of policy areas reviewed. While many policies refer to partnership working, collaboration remains concentrated within public-sector systems, particularly health and social care.

The Public Service Reform Strategy (2025) acknowledges the third sector as an important delivery partner and includes commitments to improve integration through local service planning. However, the third sector continues to be positioned primarily as a supporting contributor rather than as an equal participant in system design, governance and decision-making. This distinction is important because genuine integrated service design requires contributions from all relevant sectors throughout the planning and implementation process. As third sector services are not as well integrated into current public service design as health and social care services are, the Public Service Reform Strategy must extend beyond its current focus on the third sector as a partner and identify it as a key priority service area for improving delivery. More focus on doing so now may assist in ensuring the third sector is considered an equitably integrated sector for the long term. This recommendation is consistent with the wider shift in public administration theory from New Public Management towards New Public Governance, in which the third sector is positioned as a co-producer of public value rather than a subcontracted delivery channel (Osborne, 2010).

Third sector organisations often play significant roles in providing family support, children's health services, community development and early years provision. However, their contribution is not always reflected within strategic policy design. A more integrated approach to public service reform would involve developing clearer mechanisms for incorporating third sector organisations into governance structures, service planning processes and local collaboration arrangements.

Given the diversity and scale of the third sector, opportunities for integration are likely to vary considerably between localities. Therefore, locally developed collaboration frameworks may offer a practical route towards understanding how public, community and voluntary sector services can work together more effectively. This is particularly relevant in areas such

as children's health, early years education and care, and family support, where third sector organisations often play a significant role in service provision and community engagement. Developing a stronger evidence base regarding the role of third sector organisations within local service ecosystems could support future models of integrated public service design and strengthen place-based, community driven approaches to improving outcomes.

Recommendations for Integrated & Coordinated Public Service Policy

1. Introduce Ecological Integration Framework for Policy Design

Require policy development processes to explicitly consider how poverty, disability, migration, digital exclusion and other factors intersect to influence access to services and outcomes.

1. Strengthen Strategic Coordination Across Policy Areas

Introduce mechanisms such as cross-policy impact assessments and joint implementation planning to ensure greater alignment between related policy areas. Because structural alignment mechanisms of this kind have not on their own, been sufficient to embed collaboration in comparable Scottish reforms (Audit Scotland, 2018, 2026), they should be paired with explicit monitoring of relational practice – trust, information-sharing and joint working culture – rather than relying on the existence of the mechanism itself as evidence of integration.

2. Mainstream Migration Across Children's Service Policy

Ensure the needs of migrant children and families are explicitly considered within education, community, health, social care and digital policies rather than being addressed solely through migration-specific policy.

3. Embed the Third Sector as an Equal Partner in Public Service Reform

Move beyond viewing the third sector primarily as a delivery partner by incorporating third sector organisations into governance, planning and decision-making processes at both national and local levels.

4. Develop and Evaluate Local Models of Cross-Sector Integration

Pilot and evaluate local frameworks that bring together statutory services, community organisations and third sector partners to identify effective approaches to integrated service design and delivery.

Conclusion

Overall, the review suggests that Scotland has established, at the level of policy design, strong foundations for coordinated working within several important policy areas, particularly through GIRFEC and coordinated approaches to tackling child poverty. These frameworks demonstrate how strategic integration can support joined-up delivery across sectors and improve outcomes for children and families.

The Promise Oversight Board's own halfway-point assessment found Scotland “not yet halfway” to keeping its most comparable whole-system commitment despite equivalent strategic ambition (Promise Oversight Board, 2025), and Audit Scotland's monitoring of health and social care integration has reached similar conclusions over a much longer period (Audit Scotland, 2018, 2026). Strategic integration visible in policy design is therefore best understood as a necessary starting point for joined-up delivery, but still remains as an area requiring more development.

However, evidence of embedded cross sector and ecological integration is considerably less developed. While many policies recognise individual dimensions of disadvantage, relatively few have been designed around the intersecting realities experienced by children, young people and families. Migration, disability, poverty and digital exclusion continue to be addressed largely through separate policy domains rather than through coordinated responses that recognise their cumulative impacts.

Important gaps also remain in relation to educational transitions, the integration of migrant children and families within mainstream service planning, and the position of the third sector within public service reform. Future policy development would benefit from a more systematic approach to integration that strengthens connections between health, education, social care, community services and the third sector, while embedding ecological perspectives within policy design.

By adopting a more relational and place-based approach to public service reform, Scotland would be better positioned to deliver coordinated, equitable and sustainable policy that reflects the complexity of children's lives and the interconnected nature of the challenges they face.

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