

# The Prescription for Change: Transforming the Future of Child Health

RCPCH Scotland  
Manifesto 2026



Royal College of  
Paediatrics and Child Health  
Scotland

*Leading the way in Children's Health*

## Foreword

**Scotland stands at a pivotal moment. The upcoming Holyrood elections present a vital opportunity for us to place children and young people at the heart of policymaking and to create a landscape in which their health, wellbeing and rights are not only safeguarded, but actively prioritised.**

As Scottish Officer for the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, I'm proud to introduce this manifesto as a prescription for the change we urgently need. It reflects the realities faced by children, young people, and the professionals who care for them and sets out a bold, evidence-based vision for a fairer, healthier future.

Every day my colleagues in the child health workforce and I witness the harsh realities of long waiting times, mounting workforce pressures, rising mental health concerns, and the devastating impact of poverty on children and families. These are not abstract issues or statistics; they are lived experiences that demand urgent attention.

I want to extend my sincere thanks to all our members who completed our recent survey on their priorities for the next Scottish Government. Your insights have been invaluable, and your voices, alongside those of the children and young people we represent, are at the very heart of this manifesto.

The time to act is now. Let's build a Scotland where every child can thrive.



Dr Mairi Stark,  
RCPCH Officer for Scotland

## Children and Young People's Hopes for Child Health



Reduced waiting times



Early intervention support



Access to physical and recreational activities



Enhanced health education in school and community settings



More training for teachers and other educators

## The Prescription for Change

Ahead of the May 2026 Holyrood election, we are urging the next Scottish Government to take bold, evidence-based action to improve child health. Every child in Scotland has the right to a safe, healthy, and fulfilling life, as enshrined in the UNCRC. Our priorities for the next Scottish Government are:



## Data that Delivers: Using Data to Drive Better Child Health Outcomes

### The Case for Change

Scotland's child health services, particularly **community paediatrics**, face a critical lack of publicly available and integrated data. This limits national oversight of waiting times and service demand, hindering effective planning and delivery. The multi-sector nature of children's health and care pathways demands a higher level of coordination than adult services. Without consistent data sharing and access, efforts to deliver joined-up, person-centred care are significantly hindered. Addressing these challenges requires strategic investment in comprehensive data collection and integrated data infrastructure.

**81%** of Scottish members surveyed said community paediatric data could be improved, and **76%** agree it would support paediatricians in their work.

### The Impact

- Fragmented IT systems hinder coordination between professionals and place unnecessary strain on families, who are often required to repeatedly share their stories across services.
- Insufficient data-sharing between health, social care, education, and the voluntary sector obstructs the delivery of holistic, person-centred care and limits opportunities for early intervention.
- Inadequate digital infrastructure delays decision-making, reduces efficiency, and risks poorer outcomes, especially during critical transition points such as the move to adult services.



*Currently we experience many barriers to effective working that leads to frustration e.g. budgetary restrictions, lack of clinical space, under-resourced support services, data access restrictions etc.*

RCPCH Scotland Member, Manifesto Survey 2025

## The Prescription for Change

To deliver a modern and responsive child health system, strategic investment in digital infrastructure and data transparency is essential. We must prioritise closing data gaps to enable evidence-based planning, integrating IT systems to reduce duplication, and facilitating cross-sector data sharing to ensure coordinated support. To realise these ambitions, the next Scottish Government must:

- **Mandate Comprehensive Data Collection Across All Health Boards:** Standardised data collection across hospital and community child health services is essential to map service pressures, identify gaps, and support strategic planning.
- **Establish Uniform Reporting on Community Paediatric Waiting Times:** Implement a national system for consistent data collection and publication across all health boards to enable transparent monitoring and equitable access.
- **Improve data linkage** across health, social care, and education to enable more coordinated, holistic support and drive better outcomes for children and young people.
- **Develop a National Neurodevelopmental Data System:** Create a robust system to capture and publish referrals, assessment pathways, and outcome data, enabling clearer insight into demand and variation and supporting more effective service design.
- **Enhance Technological Integration Across Care Pathways:** Leverage digital tools to improve coordination between primary and secondary care, supporting smoother transitions, improved continuity, and more responsive care for children and young people.



*Building a connected and data-informed child health system is essential to delivering equitable, efficient and compassionate care across Scotland. By tackling systemic barriers such as fragmented digital infrastructure and inconsistent data, we can empower professionals, reduce inefficiencies and ensure better outcomes for children and young people.*

Dr Rebecca Goldman, RCPCH Deputy Scottish Officer

# The Power of Prevention: Tackling Health Inequalities

## The Case for Change

Paediatricians are witnessing a worrying decline in child health. Promoting healthy lifestyles and preventing illness early is essential to ensuring that all children and young people can thrive and live long, healthy lives. The most effective window to prevent poor health outcomes is during childhood, so prevention must be at the heart of Scotland's approach to child health.

99%



of paediatricians across the UK stated that poverty is contributing to ill-health among the children they treat.

## The Impact

- Poverty is the leading driver of poor child health. **Nearly a quarter of children** in Scotland live in relative poverty, and food insecurity affects **1 in 5 families**.
- **One in five Primary 1 children are overweight or obese**, with rates highest in deprived areas.
- Childhood dental decay is rising, particularly in communities with high levels of deprivation.
- Vaping is increasingly common among young people, affecting concentration and school engagement.
- Immunisation uptake in Scotland remains high, though there has been a gradual decline over time, with an **increase in measles cases** noted.



*I have been a consultant paediatrician since 2003. By most indices, child health in Scotland is worse in 2025 than 2003.*

RCPCH Scotland Member, Manifesto Survey 2025

## The Prescription for Change

To build a healthier future for Scotland's children, the next Scottish Government must commit to bold, coordinated action that addresses the root causes of poor health. This includes tackling child poverty, raising public awareness on health harming behaviours such as smoking and vaping, investing in early intervention and prevention, and improving access to clear, trusted health information for families. To deliver meaningful change, the next Scottish Government must:

- **Make Ending Child Poverty a National Priority**, backed by ambitious child poverty targets and long-term investment.
  - Increase the Scottish Child Payment to £40 immediately, with a commitment to double it by the end of the next parliamentary term.
  - Expand the Young Patients Family Fund to cover both inpatient and outpatient costs.
  - Commit to universal free school meals for all primary pupils.

- **Halve Childhood Obesity by 2030:**
  - Expand BMI data collection in primary schools to include additional age points to strengthen health surveillance and support timely, targeted interventions.
  - Invest in local authorities to protect and grow access to sports, leisure, and green spaces for children and young people.
  - Restrict the promotion of unhealthy food and drink, including ending unlimited refills on sugary soft drinks.
  
- **Improve Oral Health from the Earliest Years:**
  - Ensure all children are seen by a dentist by age one.
  - Implement supervised tooth brushing schemes in all nurseries and primary schools.
  
- **Reduce Youth Vaping and Smoking:**
  - Launch a public health campaign to raise awareness of smoking and vaping harms.
  - Establish dedicated cessation services for young people to support early intervention and addiction recovery.
  
- **Boost Vaccination Uptake and Access:**
  - Increase funding and staffing to improve access for all, particularly in rural and remote communities.
  - Collect national data to identify and scale effective outreach strategies.
  - Launch a multilingual, accessible public health campaign to build vaccine confidence.
  - Create a digital version of the Red Book to give families and professionals easier access to vaccination records and enable better data sharing across health systems.
  
- **Strengthen Health Information:**
  - Fund Health Boards and Local Authorities to deliver inclusive, community-based family support programmes, giving parents and carers the tools they need to support children’s behaviour, sleep, diet, and wellbeing.
  - Promote and commission the Healthier Together website and app to ensure families across Scotland have access to trusted, accessible health information when they need it most.



*The next Scottish Government has a unique opportunity to lead a generational shift in child health. By putting prevention at the heart of policy, we can break the cycle of inequality and ensure every child in Scotland has the chance to grow up healthy, happy, and well.*

**Dr Rebecca Goldman, RCPCH Deputy Scottish Officer**

# Healing Young Minds: Confronting the Mental Health and Neurodevelopmental Emergency

## The Case for Change

Scotland's children and young people are facing a growing mental health crisis. Rates of serious illness, self-harm, and suicide are rising, while services remain under-resourced and fragmented. Neurodevelopmental services are also struggling to meet demand, with long waits and inconsistent care across health boards. RCPCH Scotland urgently calls for decisive action and investment to address the escalating mental health crisis affecting children and young people.

88%



of young people  
feel that there is not  
enough support for  
their mental health.

## The Impact

- **31.4% of under 18 psychiatric admissions** were admitted outwith NHS specialist CAMH wards during the year-long period ending 31 March 2025.
- Children are ageing out of neurodevelopmental services before diagnosis, missing vital early intervention.
- ADHD assessments vary widely across health boards, creating delays and inequalities.
- Mental health spending **remains below 1%** of NHS Scotland's budget—far short of what's needed.



*My wish for child health is for all children to have access to mental health support when they need it.*

Young Person, RCPCH &Us Glasgow Innovation Lab 2025

## The Prescription for Change

The next Scottish Government must urgently strengthen mental health and neurodevelopmental services for children and young people through targeted investment, early intervention, and inclusive, coordinated care. To deliver meaningful change, the next Scottish Government must:

- **Make Child Mental Health a National Priority:** Embed children's mental health in all government strategies. Commit to statutory measures that increase CAMHS funding above 1%, with the aim of improving access, reducing waits, and preventing CYP from reaching crisis point.
- **Build a Preventative Mental Health System for CYP:** Urgently invest in accessible, age-appropriate community and universal services, including third sector support, health visiting, and school nursing, with targeted training for early years professionals and guaranteed access to mental health staff in all educational settings.
- **Transform Neurodevelopmental Services:** Guarantee early, needs-led support across education, health, and social care, without requiring a diagnosis. Establish a fully resourced national neurodevelopmental pathway to ensure timely, consistent, multidisciplinary care for all children and young people.

- **Redesign Emergency and Inpatient Settings:** Commit to ending unsuitable placements for children in mental health crisis, thereby ensuring no child is sent far from home or placed in an adult ward due to service gaps. Ensure paediatric and emergency settings are safe and therapeutic for CYP in mental distress.
- **Raise Awareness and Understanding of Neurodiversity:** Launch a national public health campaign and implement mandatory public sector training to improve understanding of neurodiversity, reduce stigma, and ensure services are equipped to support children and young people effectively.



*We are seeing more children in distress than ever before, and the system is struggling to keep pace. Paediatricians are ready to lead early intervention and holistic care, but we cannot do it alone. Scotland must act now to prioritise child mental health, invest in neurodevelopmental services, and build a system that truly meets the needs of every child.*

Dr Gavin Cobb, RCPCH Deputy Scottish Officer

## Bridge the Gap: Strengthening Child Health Services

### The Case for Change

The NHS is facing immense pressures, particularly within paediatric services, where unacceptably long waiting times are having serious and lasting consequences for children and young people.

Recent [Public Health Scotland data](#) (August 2025) shows 34.5% of children are still waiting more than 12 weeks for outpatient appointments. For many, these delays mean missing critical developmental windows for treatment and intervention, leading to irreversible harm, widening health inequalities, and increasing long-term demand on services.

**75%**  
of Scottish  
members surveyed  
stated that CYP do  
not have equitable  
access to services  
compared with  
adults.



### The Impact

- Children and families report poor communication and gaps in care while waiting for assessment.
- Delays in access lead to missed opportunities for time-sensitive interventions.
- Community paediatrics face critical workforce shortages, inconsistent data collection, and unequal access between rural and urban areas, undermining service equity and effectiveness.
- Transitions to adult services for young people with complex needs are often poorly coordinated, leaving young people without adequate support and at risk of poor health outcomes.
- Our members report that respite and home care services are overstretched and unevenly distributed.



*My wish for child health is that every young person can access comprehensive and tailored health support when they need it and without having to fight to have their problems taken seriously or sit on lengthy waiting lists.*

Young Person, RCPCH &Us Glasgow Innovation Lab 2025

## The Prescription for Change

We must urgently reduce waiting times and improve child health services by investing in community care, ensuring timely and equitable access, strengthening transitions, and embedding the voices of children and families in service design. Sustained support for the child health workforce is also critical as, without it, services cannot meet demand or deliver timely, specialist care. To deliver meaningful change, the next Scottish Government must:

- **Ensure No Child Waits:** Urgent investment is needed to recover and sustain children's health services. A crucial first step is ensuring at least 95% of children and young people are seen within the national 12-week referral-to-treatment target as delays at this stage risk serious, lasting harm.
- **Guarantee Timely, Appropriate Care:** Ensure children receive care from the right professional, at the right time, in the right setting. Guarantee equitable healthcare access across Scotland by addressing regional disparities and tailoring support to local health board needs.
- **Expand Early Intervention Capacity:** Increase investment in primary and community services to prevent CYP from reaching crisis point due to prolonged waits. Strengthen paediatric training for healthcare professionals in all settings to improve timely care.
- **Strengthen Transition Services:** Create coordinated pathways for young people with complex needs, mandating joint planning across services, and addressing workforce gaps through collaboration with adult services to ensure continuity of care into adulthood.
- **Strengthen and Expand Respite and Home Care:** Conduct a national review of respite, home care and workforce capacity to inform strategic planning, followed by targeted investment to ensure equitable, well-staffed support for families with complex needs.
- **Embed the Voices of CYP and Families:** Ensure Health Boards involve children, young people and families in service design, ensuring lived experience shapes policy and practice.
- **Support Children While They Wait:** Allocate dedicated funding to health boards and third-sector partners to introduce regular check-ins and emotional support for children awaiting appointments and improve access to school nurses and teacher guidance to support pupils and protect wellbeing.



*Every child deserves care that is timely, compassionate, and tailored to their individual needs. By prioritising responsive and equitable health services shaped by children's voices and lived experiences, we move beyond treating illness—we build a system that supports lifelong wellbeing.*


Dr Gavin Cobb, RCPCH Deputy Scottish Officer

# Building a Healthier Future: Investing in the Child Health Workforce

## The Case for Change

Scotland's child health workforce is under sustained pressure. Paediatricians report increasing workloads and burnout, with recruitment and retention particularly challenging in rural and remote areas. Despite modest increases in consultant numbers, waiting times remain high, and services are stretched across both hospital and community settings. Targeted investment and workforce planning, as well as increase paediatric training and consultant post are urgently needed to safeguard the future of paediatric care.

Scottish members surveyed ranked the expansion of paediatric training and consultant posts as their highest priority for strengthening the child health workforce.



## The Impact

- **Rising Demand:** Our members report increases in paediatric and emergency admissions, placing additional strain on services.
- **Workforce Pressures:** [Consultant headcount](#) rose from 382 to 415 between 2020 and 2025, but this modest growth has not kept pace with demand. SAS doctor headcount declined from 106 to 92.
- **Service Access and Waiting Times:** Several health boards report significant waits over 12 weeks, highlighting structural challenges in service delivery beyond staffing levels.
- **Burnout:** The [GMC 2025 survey](#) shows high burnout risk among paediatric trainees (9.8%) and trainers (12.7%). Moderate burnout risk affects over 40% of both groups.



*My role as a consultant paediatrician is severely restricted by a lack of funding. The cost of this is unavoidably poorer child health outcomes and children that enter adult life with avoidable and expensive health problems.*

RCPCH Scotland Member, Manifesto Survey 2025

## The Prescription for Change

The next Scottish Government must take significant action to support the child health workforce and strengthen the system through strategic investment, improved data, and inclusive planning. Despite increasingly challenging conditions, paediatricians across Scotland remain strongly committed to delivering high-quality care. To empower the child health workforce to deliver the next Scottish Government must:

- **Conduct a comprehensive workforce review:** Undertake a full gap analysis of the child health workforce, disaggregated by profession and specialty, to inform strategic planning across all health boards.
- **Develop a National Child Health Workforce Strategy:** Establish a bespoke data-driven strategy that addresses immediate pressures and long-term needs, based on workforce gap analysis, projected demand, and clinician-led retention insights.

- **Build a Sustainable Workforce:** Expand paediatric training and consultant posts in line with evolving models of care, service demand and workforce patterns. Invest in support services and enhance paediatric training across primary and community care. Strengthen career development through flexible working, leadership pathways, research opportunities, and multidisciplinary training.
- **Ensure Equitable Investment:** Guarantee fair investment in child health services relative to adult care, recognising the growing complexity of paediatric needs.
- **Support Remote and Rural Workforce Sustainability:** Introduce targeted incentives to attract and retain professionals in remote and rural settings, including enhanced training pathways and flexible working models. Strategic planning must prioritise long-term sustainability to prevent future staffing gaps and ensure consistent standards of care.



*Investing in the child health workforce is not optional, it is essential. The next Scottish Government must act decisively to build a system that values, supports, and sustains those who care for our children. Only through strategic investment and bold reform can we ensure every child in Scotland has access to the care they need, when they need it.*

**Dr Mairi Stark, RCPCH Officer for Scotland**

## About RCPCH Scotland

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) works to transform child health through knowledge, innovation and expertise. We have over 1300 members in Scotland. The RCPCH is responsible for training and examining paediatricians. We also advocate on behalf of members, represent their views and draw upon their expertise to inform policy development and the maintenance of professional standards.

**For further information please contact Gemma Richardson, Policy and Public Affairs Manager (Scotland), [enquiries-scotland@rcpch.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries-scotland@rcpch.ac.uk)**

**The Prescription for Change:  
Transforming the Future of  
Child Health**

RCPCH Scotland Manifesto 2026



©RCPCH 2025

Incorporated by Royal Charter and registered as a Charity in England and Wales: 1057744 and in Scotland: SCO38299.

Registered Office 5-11 Theobalds Road, London WC1X 8SH.

Patron HRH The Princess Royal.

 **RCPCH**

**Royal College of  
Paediatrics and Child Health  
Scotland**

*Leading the way in Children's Health*