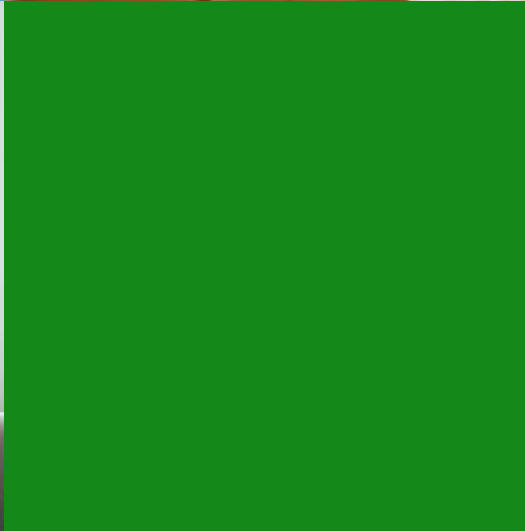
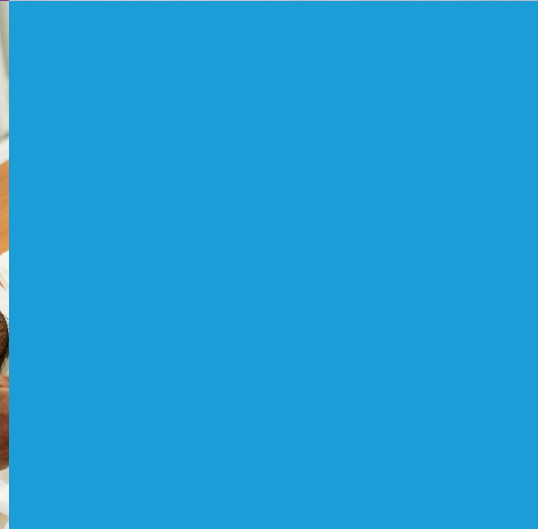


# Early Years Speech, Language and Communication Action Plan



# Acknowledgements



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- Scottish Children's Speech and Language Therapy Leads Network
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- Third Sector Partners
- Early Years Scotland
- Scottish Directors of Allied Health Professions (AHPs)
- Indigo Childcare
- Health Visiting Leads Network
- Smart Play Network

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# Executive Summary

This Action Plan sets a bold national vision: **to ensure that every child in Scotland has the strongest possible start in speech, language and communication from the earliest stages of life.** This vision reflects a clear commitment to a preventative approach, one that challenges the status quo by prioritising early, timely intervention. Such an approach recognises that early support is crucial in mitigating difficulties before these become entrenched, with the potential to improve outcomes for children and their families.

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This Action Plan outlines the proactive and collaborative steps the Scottish Government will take to lead and enable the fundamental, system-wide change needed to significantly improve early Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) outcomes for all children across Scotland, from pre-birth through to school. This Action Plan supports a key commitment in our Programme for Government 2025, to reduce developmental concerns at the 27-30 month review by a quarter by 2030, with a particular focus on addressing inequality. SLC is the most common concern seen at 27-30 months, and is an essential foundation of every child's development. These skills influence a child's mental health and emotional wellbeing, as well as their ability to learn and build relationships. However, in Scotland, too many children, particularly those growing up in disadvantaged communities, experience preventable delays in SLC development. These delays often contribute to a range of lifelong challenges, including poorer educational attainment, social isolation and increased risk of mental health difficulties. Supporting the development of SLC is key to realising children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly their right to be heard, to express themselves and to reach their full potential.

This Plan seeks primarily to reduce the risk of preventable SLC concerns in the early years. It is recognised that not all SLC needs are preventable, including those associated with biomedical conditions or neurodevelopmental differences, but the actions in this plan may help to support reducing the impact of such needs.

Building on the vital and innovative work of the National Early Language and Communication (NELC) team, the Plan is dedicated to transforming early years support across Scotland, paying particular attention to SLC development. It makes a crucial contribution to delivering our national [Early child development transformational change programme](#), reinforcing the commitment to equity, inclusion and the delivery of services that meet the needs of all children. By emphasising **prevention, equity and partnership**, the Action Plan aims to ensure that every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to develop the communication skills that are essential for success in education, relationships and life.

The Action Plan is structured around three key pillars through which efforts are needed to address identified challenges to provide a whole system, preventative approach for early speech, language and communication development:



#### Leadership and Accountability

- Embedding early years SLC as a national priority through clear leadership, transparent governance and data-driven decision-making. This ensures sustained focus and resource allocation, particularly for communities with the greatest need.



#### Families and Communities

- Promoting a strengths-based, public health approach that supports families from pregnancy onwards, with knowledge, confidence and access to culturally relevant, community-based resources. This pillar fosters language-rich environments that enable every child to thrive.



#### Skilled and Supported Workforce

- Supporting the development of a confident, knowledgeable and well-supported workforce across health, education and social care sectors. We will work towards greater alignment of professional learning and practice standards across these sectors, paying attention to implementation, in order to promote high-quality, inclusive support for children's communication development.

# Ministerial Foreword

**The earliest years of life are crucial to a child’s development and have a lasting impact on outcomes and opportunities later in life. That is why, in the Programme for Government published in May 2025, we reiterated our commitment to reducing developmental concerns at the 27–30 month review by a quarter by 2030, with a particular focus on addressing the inequality that we see emerging at this stage of life.**

The overall levels of child development concerns being recorded have increased since the pandemic, and concerns about speech, language and communication (SLC) are the most prevalent at the 27–30 month review point. SLC underpins every aspect of a child’s development—their relationships, mental health and wellbeing, learning and future life opportunities. Yet in Scotland today, far too many children, particularly those living in areas of significant socio-economic disadvantage, face avoidable challenges in their early SLC development. These challenges create barriers that can persist throughout life, limiting educational attainment, social integration and mental health outcomes.

Recognising this urgent and critical issue, the Scottish Government has placed children’s SLC development at the heart of our Early Child Development Transformational Change Programme. The National Early Language and Communication (NELC) team has been instrumental in highlighting the scale and nature of the challenges faced, as well as the opportunities for prevention and effective early intervention. We want to build on the considerable progress and achievements made by the NELC team over the past two years to transform outcomes for all children, especially those growing up in the most disadvantaged communities. We are grateful to the NELC team for their dedication, expertise and collaborative approach and the support of the National Speech, Language and Communication Stakeholder Reference Group, who together have laid a strong foundation for this National Action Plan.

Scotland has a strong foundation for promoting and supporting early childhood development through our long-standing getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) framework, which underpins the delivery of joined-up, holistic and preventative support for children and their families across universal and specialist services.

Our transformational early years policies, including the expansion of funded early learning and childcare to 1,140 hours per year, the Family Nurse Partnership, Universal Health Visiting Pathway, Bookbug, PlayTalkRead and Scotland’s Baby Box, give children the best possible start in life and provide the opportunity to support children’s early SLC development.

The Early Years Speech, Language and Communication Action Plan sets out a bold, clear and achievable vision: to ensure that every child in Scotland has the strongest possible foundation in speech, language and communication, starting from the earliest stages of life.

The Plan outlines how this vision will be realised in practice, through concrete actions led by Scottish Government and with partners playing essential roles in delivery. It focuses on prevention, equity and partnership, building on strengths within existing services, from maternity care through to early learning and childcare, while at the same time, addressing gaps and barriers that too often prevent families from receiving the support they need.

Change is only possible through the sustained commitment and leadership of those working closest to children and families, including health visitors, midwives, ELC practitioners, speech and language therapists and community organisations. It is crucial that this professional support is delivered with families at the centre.

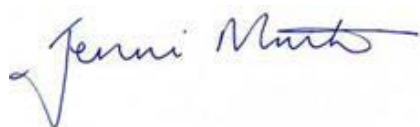
Delivering on this Plan requires collaboration across government, local authorities, the NHS, the third sector and communities. The Scottish Government will continue to engage families and practitioners throughout implementation to ensure actions are meaningful, inclusive and responsive to lived experience.

This Plan represents a shared commitment by leaders and decision makers across Scotland. Through this collaborative plan and the collective commitment of all partners, we are confident we can build a Scotland where every child has the speech, language and communication skills they need to thrive, in education, in relationships and in life.



**Natalie Don-Innes MSP,**

Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise



**Jenni Minto MSP,**

Minister for Public Health and Women's Health



**Tom Arthur MSP,**

Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing

**This plan will benefit all babies and children and their families with a focus on prevention and early intervention.**

**This plan will focus on SLC needs associated with inequalities.**



# SLC Aim: Reduce the % of children in Scotland from SIMD quintiles 1 and 2 with SLC concerns at 27–30 months by 25% by 2030

**Vision:** Together we will create the conditions to develop every child’s speech, language and communication, starting from pre-birth, nurturing them to reach their fullest potential with a focus on reducing the inequalities gap.

## Theory of Change for the Early Years Speech, Language and Communication (SLC) Action Plan



**Support parents’ and caregivers’ wellbeing & capacity to provide nurturing care for SLC development from the earliest opportunity**



**Create a skilled and supported workforce that reduces inequality and enhances early SLC development**



**Integrate policies and services that impact on early SLC, ensuring they are evidence based, data driven and responsive to need**

### Families and Communities

By strengthening national communication, parents are given the information they need to nurture their child’s SLC development from pre-birth

With appropriate face-to-face relational early SLC support, all parents are empowered to provide nurturing, responsive interactions from pre-birth

SLC content is integrated into collaborative family support offers that respond to inequalities and population need, as part of a preventative approach

### Skilled and Supported Workforce

Early learning and childcare settings provide interactions, experiences and spaces that support early SLC development

Through alignment of existing qualifications and training with SLC priorities, the early-years workforce has the knowledge and skills required to support early SLC development

Strong workforce development infrastructure ensures access to high quality continuous professional learning for early SLC

### Leadership and Accountability

Appointment of a National Early SLC Lead ensures early SLC is integrated into policies and services through co-ordination of delivery that includes a robust evidence base, shared understanding and multi-agency governance

Promotion of the inclusion of early SLC within Children’s Services Planning ensures a strategic multi-agency approach to planning and delivery of services

Data that informs planning and management of national and local resources to support early SLC is more accessible and more widely used

Ministerial responsibility for early SLC ensures an understanding of the importance of early SLC and the need to take a whole system approach

# Why Children's Early Speech, Language and Communication Development Is So Important

**SLC skills are foundational to every aspect of a child's development, from building relationships and emotional wellbeing, to learning and future life chances. Early difficulties with SLC are strongly linked to poorer educational outcomes, social isolation, mental health challenges and reduced employment prospects later in life.**

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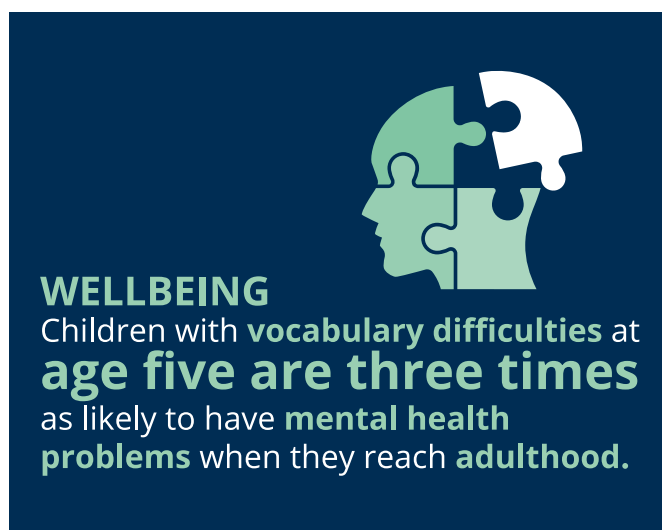
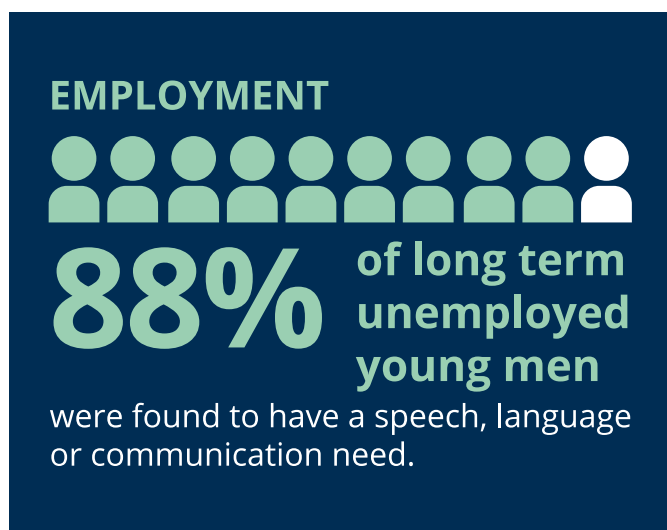
Children with communication needs are at a greater risk of not having their rights realised or protected. Children growing up in poverty are disproportionately affected, often starting early learning and childcare (ELC) or school with a developmental gap that can widen over time.

This Action Plan focuses on strengthening the system's support for early communication development in all children from pre-birth to school starting age. It forms a key component of Scotland's Whole Family Support approach. Supporting every child to develop strong early SLC skills is essential to disrupting entrenched cycles of disadvantage and addressing inequalities at their source, by reducing the risk of poorer outcomes associated with early childhood poverty.

It also supports our ambition to keep The Promise by contributing to better outcomes for care-experienced children, many of whom are at increased risk of developing SLC needs.

Strong SLC skills underpin literacy and numeracy development, emotional wellbeing and self-regulation.

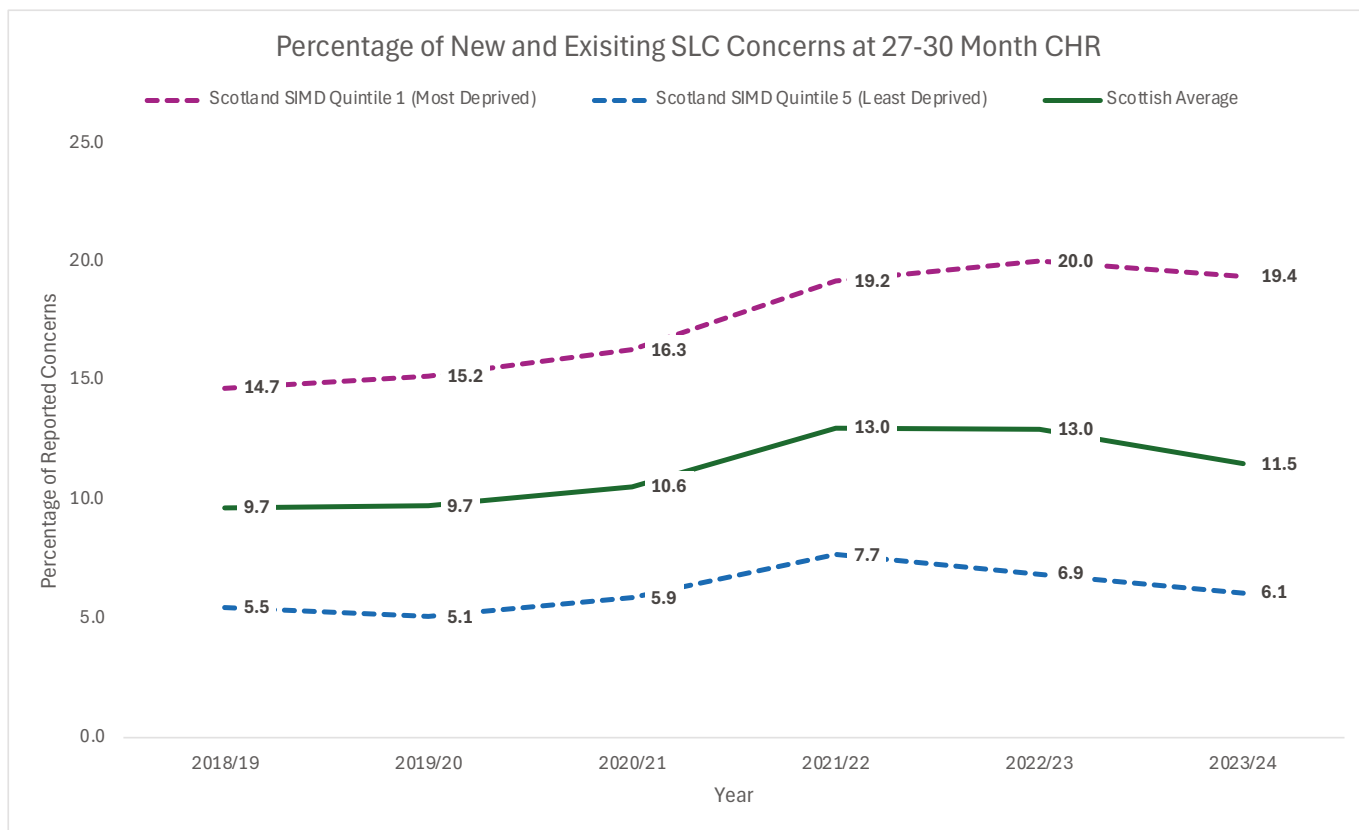
Figure 1: [Infographics](#) highlighting the scale of SLC concerns in Scotland and the lifelong impact these needs can have on children, families and wider society.



Source: co-produced by the NELC team and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) Scotland (2024)

Early child development statistics from 2023–2024 showed that children living in the most deprived areas of Scotland were more than three times as likely to have an SLC concern at the 27–30 month Child Health Review (CHR) compared to those in the least deprived areas. Specifically, 19.4% of children in the most deprived areas had a recorded concern, compared to 6.1% in the least deprived areas. The graph below highlights this stark and persistent social gradient in early SLC concerns across Scotland.

Figure 2: New and Existing SLC Concerns at 27–30 Month Child Health Review



Source: *Public Health Scotland Early Child Development Statistics Dashboard* ([Dashboard - Early child development statistics - Scotland 2023 to 2024 - Early child development - Publications - Public Health Scotland](#))



These figures are challenging; however, change is possible. There is a robust body of evidence supporting the importance of environmental factors and the crucial role of 'early and often' responsive adult-child interactions in the development of SLC. Additionally, there is good evidence that parental responsiveness is a protective factor for children experiencing wider socioeconomic risks. Supporting early parental responsiveness provides an opportunity to prevent SLC needs arising for some children and improve SLC outcomes for all.

Supporting children's SLC requires collective responsibility across health, education, social work, community services, families and communities. Our engagement with parents indicates they recognise the importance of SLC development, but there can be a perception that communication will develop naturally through general experiences such as attending nursery with other children. This Plan aims to empower all parents and carers by highlighting their vital role and providing accessible support for early communication development. Every contact with a child and family is an opportunity to nurture communication, especially for those facing poverty and multiple disadvantages. Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) play a crucial role in SLC support across the system, at both local and national levels. Their expertise as practitioners, leaders and key collaborators enhances service design, capacity building and workforce development within planning and delivery for whole-system improvement.

# Why Are We Producing This Action Plan?

Despite Scotland's strong policy foundations and excellent early years programmes, persistent inequalities remain in early child development, with speech, language and communication being of primary concern and inter-connected with other aspects of development.

This Action Plan sets out a clear national commitment to close the SLC developmental gap through coordinated action, leadership and community empowerment, with an increased focus on prevention. Delivering improvements in early SLC is not an isolated priority. It is embedded within our whole-system approach to Early Childhood Development, underpinned by national efforts to tackle child poverty and address disadvantage from the earliest stages of life.

In conversations with local leaders (including ELC, SLT and Health Visiting leads), several barriers have been identified, including workforce capacity, fragmented planning processes, inconsistent access to data and a lack of shared tools across sectors. In some areas, services face difficulties reaching families at greatest risk of SLC concerns and practitioners may lack confidence in promoting early communication. This Plan seeks to address those barriers by providing national leadership, common frameworks and stronger alignment across systems.



By **age 5** there is a **13 month gap** in **expressive vocabulary** between children from the **richest** and **poorest** backgrounds.



**1 in 4** children and young people in **Scotland** have a predicted **speech, language** and **communication** need.

Source: co-produced by the NELC team and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) Scotland (2024)

# The Role of the National Early Language and Communication (NELC) Team

In January 2023, Public Health Scotland (PHS) published a package of [three reports](#) on SLC development among children in Scotland, focusing on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Scottish Government established the NELC team in response to the evidence that children's early SLC development had been negatively impacted.

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Six whole time equivalent SLTs were seconded to Education Scotland for 23 months, from September 2023 to August 2025, to establish the NELC project. The NELC team worked through a structured plan, initially focusing on understanding the landscape of SLC support across Scotland. Information gathered from stakeholders was analysed and shared through local, multi-disciplinary events, highlighting the importance of data, the evidence base and multi-agency collaboration. The team has supported local areas by producing a [self-evaluation framework](#) to allow them to reflect on their current SLC systems and consider how to build a confident and capable multi-agency early years workforce.

The team has been supported by a Project Advisory Group and National Stakeholder Reference Group comprising key partners, including the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES), Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), RCSLT, Early Years Scotland, Public Health Scotland (PHS), Care Inspectorate and NHS Education for Scotland (NES).

Insights gained throughout the NELC project informed and shaped the development of this Action Plan to include a focus on prevention, a consistent use of data and targeting supports to families who are underserved by current offers. Importantly, the team facilitated parental engagement to ensure actions identified in this Plan are grounded in families' lived experiences and are responsive to their preferences.

The NELC team produced a range of evidence-informed resources to support local services and inform learning and development offers. These include:

- [Chatting Together](#): A national resource for early language and communication key messages hosted on Parent Club (Annex A).
- [Early Speech, Language and Communication Development: Which Factors are Associated with Better or Poorer Outcomes?](#): Exploration of the evidence and research.
- An expanded version of the [My World Triangle](#) within the National Practice Model, adapted to include factors for members of the early years workforce to consider when carrying out a wellbeing assessment.
- [How can we create a Language and Communication Supportive Environment \(LCSE\) in Early Learning and Childcare settings?](#): A resource for practitioners.
- [SLC Knowledge and Skills Matrix for the Early Years Workforce](#): Learning and development self-evaluation framework.
- [Self-evaluation tool](#): Focusing on local system supports for early SLC development.



# Building on Strong Foundations

**As well as the resources listed above, this Plan builds on a robust network of existing Scottish Government policies, programmes and resources that have the potential to support children's early SLC development. These include:**

- Funded early learning and childcare (ELC) offering 1,140 hours to all 3 and 4 year olds, and eligible 2 years old in households on qualifying low income benefits, those with care experience or with parents who have care experience. According to the most recent ELC Census the estimated uptake rate for ages 3 and 4 is 95%.
- Funding to local authorities for Equity and Excellence Leads, who are graduate level practitioners working in nurseries in the most disadvantaged communities.
- The Equity for All (EfA) report, which was commissioned and published by the Scottish Government in 2022, and supported Children's Speech and Language Therapy services to complete a comprehensive needs assessment. This report helped to better understand service delivery models, provided evidence around predicted need and built upon the Ready to Act transformational plan in promoting the value of targeted support, joint partnership working and outcomes-based service planning to improve outcomes for children with communication needs.
- Speech and language therapy (SLT) services across Scotland, which enable prevention and promote the least intrusive interventions through a tiered model of service design and delivery (universal, targeted and specialist levels of provision).
- Children's Services Planning, which is Scotland's statutory framework for local strategic planning and delivery of services to improve outcomes for children, young people and families. National-level guidance can play a key role in supporting local areas to prioritise early SLC development within their Children's Services Plans, ensuring a coordinated, needs-led approach across services.
- National initiatives promoting early literacy and language-rich home environments, such as PlayTalkRead, which visits every local authority in Scotland throughout the year, and Bookbug, which provides every child in Scotland with 14 books by the time they reach primary one.
- Scotland's Baby Box Programme, which provides essential items for the first six months of a baby's life, worth around £400, and key information on health and wellbeing for babies and parents. The Baby Box Programme is the only national universal offer of its kind in the UK and, since its launch in 2017, has provided over 350,000 baby boxes to parents.

- Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC), Scotland’s national approach to placing children’s rights and wellbeing at the centre of policy and practice. It supports joined-up, holistic delivery of universal and targeted services, and provides a common framework for planning and delivering preventative support. GIRFEC underpins the implementation of key national priorities, including UNCRC, Tackling Child Poverty, Whole Family Wellbeing, Early Child Development and Keeping the Promise.
- The Scottish Model of Infant Participation, based on Article 12 of UNCRC, which recognises infant voice and upholds the rights of babies to meaningful participation.
- The [Universal Health Visiting Pathway](#), providing core contacts to all families from the health visiting service between pre-birth and school entry, with eight visits in the first year of life. This pathway provides a continuum of assessment identifying and responding to early child development concerns. Early evaluation shows that parents feel supported and develop a trusting relationship with their health visitor.
- The Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (PIMH) Fund, providing crucial support services for parents, carers, infants and families who are experiencing mental health difficulties during the perinatal period, supporting them during this important stage of life through delivering peer support, parenting and infant support, and counselling and psychological support. The Fund has supported over 21,400 parents, expectant parents and infants since 2020.
- Wellbeing for Wee Ones campaign accompanied by the launch of the [Wellbeing for Wee Ones Hub](#) on the Parent Club website, supporting parents to gain an understanding of their infant’s emotional and mental wellbeing from an early stage.
- [Family Nurse Partnership \(FNP\)](#), offering intensive support for young first time parents in the home, to develop sensitive, responsive care-giving to better meet their child’s developmental needs and improve a range of outcomes.
- Whole Family Wellbeing Fund, supporting families facing multiple challenges.
- The [Population Health Framework](#) sets out Scottish Government and COSLA’s cross-sector, whole-system, preventative approach to improving Scotland’s health and reducing health inequalities over the next decade. It recognises the importance of the wider determinants, or ‘building blocks’, of health – including good early years and education – and sets out 30 initial actions intended to improve these key building blocks.

This Action Plan also complements and builds on local examples of innovative and highly effective collaborative practice that are being developed and implemented across the country. By embedding SLC development into these wider efforts, we ensure strategic coherence and collective impact.

# Our Approach: Three Pillars of Action

The Action Plan is founded on three interconnected pillars that are critical to creating lasting, system-wide change in how Scotland supports children's early SLC development. These pillars have been based on insights from across the system as to where changes are needed to support a more holistic, preventative approach and directly contribute to the drivers set out in our Early Child Development change theory. Each pillar addresses a distinct but interconnected area and together they form a comprehensive framework to improve outcomes for all children, especially those facing disadvantage.

These pillars are:

## 1. Leadership and Accountability

Strong leadership and clear accountability structures across the system are essential to embed early SLC as a national priority. This means ensuring that all levels of government and public services, from national to local, take responsibility for delivering measurable improvements. Transparent governance, supported by robust data and evidence, will guide informed decision making and ensure resources are directed towards prevention and where they are most needed. Without visible leadership and coordinated multi-agency oversight there is a risk that efforts become fragmented and less effective.

## 2. Families and Communities

This pillar focuses on empowering families and communities with the knowledge, confidence and resources they need to support babies' and children's SLC from pregnancy onwards. By building language-rich environments and strengthening everyday responsive interactions between babies and children, and their caregivers, we can reduce the number of children who develop SLC concerns. Empowering families means delivering culturally relevant, accessible support tailored to the diverse needs of Scotland's communities.

## 3. Skilled and Supported Workforce

The quality of care and support that children receive is fundamentally shaped by the expertise, confidence and commitment of professionals across the health, education and social care sectors. This pillar focuses on developing a highly skilled, knowledgeable and well-supported workforce who, through engagement with SLT services, are equipped: to create and maintain inclusive language and communication supportive environments for every baby and child, to recognise key factors associated with better or poorer SLC outcomes and to deliver impactful evidence-informed early interventions.

## Why These Pillars

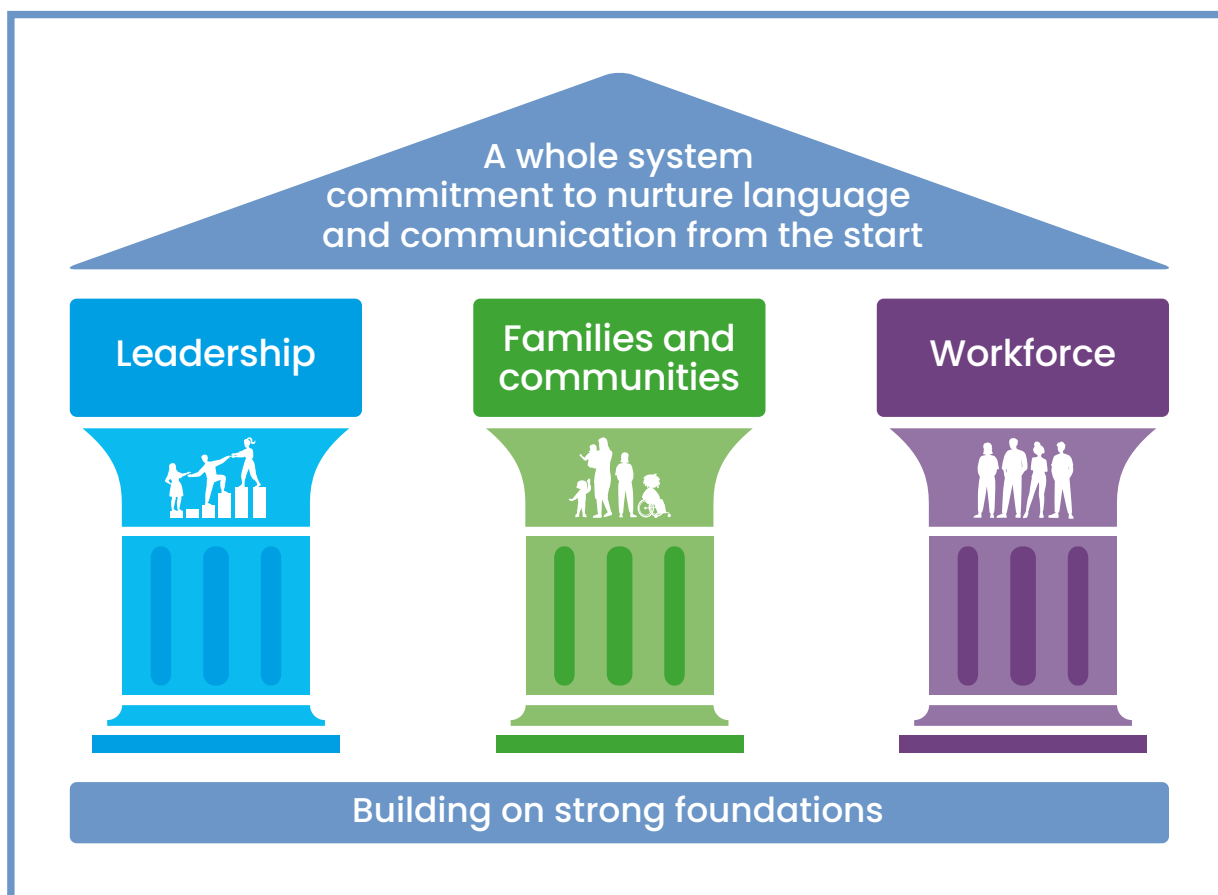
The pillars of this plan emerged directly from the evidence and engagement work undertaken with stakeholders, practitioners and families. They reflect the areas where change is most needed if we are to improve outcomes in early communication, and link closely with the wider ECD programme mapped in Annex B.

## From Pillars to Action

The pillars highlight the areas where change is needed. The Scottish Government's role is to act as an enabler, creating the national conditions, resources and leadership that make those changes possible, setting out a series of concrete Scottish Government actions aligned to each pillar. These actions are not about prescribing local practice; they are about ensuring the policy, investment and system levers at the national level are aligned in the right direction, and support the work already happening in communities and services.

These interconnected pillars cannot be considered in isolation, and progress is needed on all three. For example, leadership that prioritises early SLC development drives investment forward in workforce development and ensures that prevention-focused programmes reach families effectively. Likewise, an empowered workforce can provide data and feedback that inform leadership decisions and strengthen accountability. Families supported by skilled practitioners, at the earliest stage, are able to provide a nurturing home learning environment that supports early SLC development.

By adopting this three-pillar framework, the Scottish Government commits to a holistic, sustainable approach that recognises the complexity of early communication development and the need for coordinated, multi-sectoral action, supported by the values and principles of GIRFEC and the Quality Improvement journey.



# Pillar 1: Leadership and Accountability



Systemic and lasting change starts with the Scottish Government providing clear and visible leadership to ensure early SLC development is recognised as a national priority from pre-birth onwards. This involves setting firm expectations, embedding SLC within key policies, using robust data to guide decisions, and holding all partners accountable for delivering measurable improvements.

## The Scottish Government will:

- **Promote the inclusion of early SLC within Children’s Services Planning.**  
How: We will work to ensure that early SLC outcomes, including priorities from the pre-birth to 3 period, are clearly reflected in Children’s Services Plans and articulate the opportunity for preventative approaches. This will include setting expectations within national guidance and support materials for Children’s Services Planning Leads. Engaging local SLT services in planning processes, in line with the GIRFEC approach, will help drive consistent, joined-up action across the system to support children’s communication development from the earliest stage.
- **Improving the accessibility and use of existing data sets on early SLC development.**  
How: We will work with PHS and Local Government to promote access to, and use of, existing local level data sets that capture early SLC development disaggregated by deprivation and other key inequalities. This will include ensuring local planners and practitioners are aware of which data sets are available, how to access their local data and how to interpret the data to support local decision making. Reliable, detailed data will enable evidence-based planning, help target support to communities with the greatest need and track progress in closing the gap between children in the most and least disadvantaged areas.
- **Appoint a dedicated National Early SLC Lead to coordinate delivery and monitor progress.**  
How: We will designate a National Early SLC Lead to drive the national agenda on early SLC. This Lead will be based in NHS Education for Scotland (NES) and be supported by a small team of senior Speech and Language Therapists, building on the first phase of NELC work, based within Education Scotland. This team will act as the focal point to maintain momentum, promote best practice and support accountability across all sectors, contributing to children’s communication outcomes. The National SLC Stakeholder Reference Group will play a critical role in supporting delivery.

- **Assign joint responsibility to three Ministers with specific portfolios related to early SLC.**

How: Responsibility for driving the delivery of the Action Plan will be jointly held by the Minister for Children, Young People and The Promise; the Minister for Public Health and Women’s Health; and the Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing. This shared ministerial leadership will ensure clear accountability at the highest levels of government, promote collaborative working across relevant sectors and provide coherent oversight of early years, health and family support systems.

Through these actions, the Scottish Government will set the strategic direction, ensure transparency and strengthen accountability, while collaborating closely with local authorities, NHS Boards and the third sector to deliver improvements on the ground.



## Case Study

Leadership and Accountability practice example – Eddie Fraser, Chief Executive, East Ayrshire Council



At the newly developed Executive Leadership Group for Infants, Children and Young People discussions began with a focus on collaborative strategies to support the speech, language and communication development of all infants and children.

To reduce overall concerns and to narrow the poverty related gap, leaders all agreed it was key that we recognise early speech, language and communication development as a critical foundation for better long-term outcomes for children.

As a leadership team, we were aware of the national work and projects beginning to identify how localities and services can develop and support a whole systems approach to early language and communication.

At a time of significant financial challenge in the public sector, we protected a fund for prevention and early intervention to provide investment in areas that show potential to deliver real sustainable improvement in the lives of our communities. This has been made possible and received higher profile due to the sponsorship of our Chief Executive, Senior Leaders and Elected Members.

As a Council we understand that some of the impact can be over many years and look forward to seeing the impact from the investment.”



## Pillar 2: Families and Communities



The Scottish Government recognises that early SLC development begins before birth and is strongly influenced by families and communities. We are committed to empowering families, particularly those who are most vulnerable, by strengthening and aligning existing universal and targeted services to provide consistent, timely, relational and trusted support, that is relevant to the diverse needs of Scotland's communities. These actions are underpinned by the GIRFEC approach, with the National Practice Model providing a shared language and a framework for practitioners. The actions are also firmly grounded in the principles of UNCRC, recognising the rights of babies and young children to have their voices heard and respected, and giving parents the support they need.

### The Scottish Government will:

- **Strengthen face to face, relational early SLC support to families from pre-birth.**  
How: We will use established national and local networks to promote shared responsibility across the system and consistent use of resources, such as the Chatting Together key messages, to reinforce the opportunity for prevention and early intervention. This will be achieved by updating guidance, embedding messages in current training and sharing best practice across early years services. Our role will focus on providing coordination and strategic leadership within existing governance structures, to support consistent and clear communication with families from pre-birth onwards, ensuring that professionals across services deliver aligned, supportive messages to parents and carers at every stage.
- **Build on collaborative family support offers, with integrated SLC content, that respond to family need.**  
How: We will set clear expectations for joint planning, delivery and shared accountability across key services, including health, education, third sector, social services and SLT. This will include the improved use of shared data, local intelligence and evidence to identify children at risk earlier and enable targeted, preventative support.

Local partnerships will be expected to empower professionals, families and communities to work together from the earliest point, jointly identifying need, designing interventions and delivering non-stigmatising support underpinned by family engagement. Progress will be monitored through existing children’s services planning frameworks, with a strengthened focus on how services are working together to meet the needs of children and families.

- **Strengthen national communication to promote early SLC**

How: We will enhance the reach and impact of early SLC messages, such as ‘Chatting Together’, through established national channels. This includes building on the information already available from Parent Club and strengthening the existing health and wellbeing advice in the Baby Box, through the inclusion of accessible, engaging SLC information for parents and carers, by March 2026. Our approach will be informed by data on how and where families access support and guidance.

Through these actions, the Scottish Government will take a public health approach and provide strategic leadership and coordination to ensure families are empowered and supported within existing frameworks, maximising the impact of current resources to improve children’s early SLC outcomes.



## Case Study

Families and communities practice example – ‘Hello in there wee one’ (Dundee)



‘Hello in there wee one’ was developed by a collaborative group including NHS Tayside, Dundee Contemporary Arts, the University of Dundee, Dundee City Council and a Visual Artist, led by NHS Infant Mental Health team.

To support ante-natal bonding, we wanted to encourage expectant parents to communicate with their baby. We worked with local families and health professionals using participative arts approaches, to design the content and the artworks. The ‘Hello in there wee one’ book and online resource supports expectant parents to imagine their growing baby, and to talk, read and sing to them. The book is given to every expectant parent in Dundee at their 16-week midwifery appointment as part of their routine care and is available in a video and Dundonian Scots edition which enhances inclusivity and accessibility.

Small changes at the earliest stage, as relationships are developing, are shown to be most cost effective. Parents feel more confident to start communicating and know how to begin. This will ultimately support infants’ voices to be better heard and understood, their needs better recognised and their rights fulfilled, right from the start. This illustrates how working closely with families and local communities through a strengths-based, culturally relevant approach effectively supports children’s early communication development.



## Pillar 3: Skilled and Supported Workforce



The Scottish Government recognises that a confident and knowledgeable workforce is essential to supporting children's early SLC development with a focus on prevention and early intervention. We will ensure that professionals working in early years, health and family support sectors are equipped with the practical skills and confidence to deliver meaningful change. This includes aligning initial qualifications with national expectations, strengthening workforce development infrastructure and embedding supportive approaches, such as coaching and modelling, into everyday practice.

We recognise that training alone is not enough to achieve sustainable improvements. That's why we will build on improvement capacity and resources in the system to help people put learning into practice and implement the changes that are needed. Initial training and ongoing professional learning needs must be addressed to support the workforce in delivering the ambitions of the Action Plan and sustaining improvements in practice, including through the promotion and adoption of Quality Improvement as an approach to change.

The Scottish Government will prioritise three key actions:

- **Align Existing Qualifications and Training with SLC Priorities**

How: We will work with education providers, professional bodies and regulators to ensure that initial qualifications for ELC practitioners, midwives, health visitors and Family Nurse Partnership staff embed early SLC knowledge and skills. For ELC practitioners, this will include contributions to the Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) and Modern Apprenticeships review. For health visitors, we will continue collaboration with NES and the Specialised Community Public Health Nurse course providers, to embed early SLC development into training. We will work proactively to overcome current barriers within the qualification review systems and drive forward urgent changes, ensuring new practitioners are equipped from day one to meet children's early communication needs.

- **Ensure Access to High-Quality Continuous Professional Learning for Early SLC**

How: We will work with NES, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), Education Scotland and others to provide high-quality learning opportunities and resources with a focus on preventative and early SLC development approaches. This includes expanding access to coaching, modelling and in-practice support. NES's existing resources will be central to this and will be further enhanced through the implementation of the [SLC Knowledge and Skills Matrix](#) for the early years workforce. We will prioritise its wider implementation and uptake, especially in early years settings. We will also strengthen workforce development infrastructure to ensure that continuous professional learning (CPL) is matched by practical support mechanisms including modelling, peer support, mentoring, coaching and self-reflection. This approach will enable practitioners to develop skills in real-world settings and to build their confidence through practice.

- **Promote the Role of Language and Communication Supportive Environments in High-Quality ELC**

How: We will engage with Education Scotland to encourage and support ELC practitioners to embed language and communication supportive environments through promotion of a [National Language and Communication Supportive Environments resource](#). This resource focuses on core aspects of language and communication supportive environments and how this can be implemented, with consideration of practitioner skills, knowledge and confidence in practice.

In addition, we will work collaboratively with the Care Inspectorate and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) to explore how aspects of language and communication supportive environments, across interactions, experiences and spaces, can be evidenced in reporting aligned with the Quality Improvement Framework for Early Learning and Childcare Sectors. Our approach to quality assurance will be supportive rather than punitive, recognising current workforce gaps and focusing on capacity building over performance.

Furthermore, the Children and Young People Improvement Collaborative (CYPIC), alongside the NELC team, will work with a local area using Quality Improvement methods to learn what it takes to implement the Chatting Together principles in ELC settings, with the ambition to use this learning to spread an implementation approach more widely across Scotland.

## Case Study

### Perth and Kinross – Engagement with Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) early learning and childcare providers

The Perth and Kinross Early Years Team identified the need to ensure that practitioners are developing their skills, knowledge and confidence to ensure that children in ELC experience language-rich environments that improve their talking and listening skills. They have developed a range of tailored professional learning opportunities across the broader early years' workforce.

Induction training takes place for all new ELC practitioners employed by Perth and Kinross Council (PKC). All materials are added to their Padlets ELC Communication and Language Early Learning and Childcare Induction which was in part, co-created with NHS Tayside SLT colleagues.

They have delivered bespoke training where needed to meet the individual needs of partners, such as when there were significant changes in the early years team. Bespoke Childminder training is planned across the year and features a focus on speech, language, and communication to support the work they do with children and their families.

By the nature of the ethos in PKC, and to ensure equity, they include all our settings across Local Authority, Partner Providers and Private Voluntary and Independent (PVI) in their learning offers.

Due to the close partnerships PKC has with their Childminder, ELC and PVI settings, they feel they can meet the needs of all individual settings using their inclusive and flexible resources. For example, they offer training at different times of the day and offer recorded options.

The PVI workforce and Childminders in PKC feel included and involved in all the work they do to support communication and language, and they seek their feedback on ways to improve their service and offer of support.



# Oversight and Accountability

The Scottish Government will ensure effective oversight of the Early Years Speech, Language and Communication Action Plan by building on existing governance structures. A streamlined approach will support national accountability while allowing for local flexibility in delivery. We will collaborate closely with Local Authorities, Service Managers, ELC Practitioners and NHS Scotland, to jointly incorporate early SLC related indicators linked to child wellbeing, attainment and poverty.

## Governance and Reporting

- Progress on the Action Plan will be reported regularly to Ministers and COSLA, through the Education and Childcare Assurance Board (ECAB). The ECAB is jointly chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills and the COSLA Spokesperson for Children and Young People. This Plan proposes that the ECAB will review progress annually, providing both scrutiny and strategic direction to the activity that arises from this plan.
- Progress will also be reported to Ministers through the reporting mechanisms of the ECD Transformational Change Programme, providing strategic leadership and alignment with wider national priorities. This includes a new shared leadership role for SLC, the reporting of which will be integrated into the existing quarterly Early Child Development Programme update meetings.
- The SLC Stakeholder Reference Group will continue to play a pivotal role in supporting delivery and providing oversight.

## Monitoring Within Existing Frameworks

- We will work with the Children's Services Planning Strategic Leads Network, as they begin to develop their 2026–2029 plans, to incorporate early SLC-related indicators linked to ECD, child wellbeing, attainment and poverty.
- We will explore ways to strengthen the monitoring of early SLC development within GIRFEC processes, supporting opportunities for prevention, early identification and timely, responsive support, for example promoting use of the GIRFEC SLC My World Triangle.

## **Data and Workforce**

- In partnership with PHS, we will explore opportunities to improve access to local-level SLC outcome data and develop user-friendly dashboards to inform planning and action at local and national levels.
- We will identify opportunities to integrate with the new Outcomes and Measurement Framework and dashboard for funded ELC, which supports local government to identify challenges and implement improvement measures in delivering childcare.

## **Links with the Scottish Attainment Challenge**

- Given the importance of children's early SLC in relation to the poverty-related attainment gap, we will ensure that appropriate links are made with the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

By embedding early SLC needs within existing governance and monitoring frameworks, the Scottish Government aims to drive progress through clear national oversight, informed data use and strong support for local implementation.

# Conclusion

**The Early Years Speech, Language and Communication Action Plan embodies Scotland's shared commitment to nurturing children's SLC from the very beginning of life. Recognising early speech, language and communication development as foundational to upholding children's rights, supporting wellbeing, ensuring educational success and building future life chances, the Plan is firmly rooted in principles of prevention, equity and partnership.**

Our goal is to ensure every child, regardless of background or circumstance, will have opportunities to develop the SLC skills that enable them to reach their full individual potential and to engage confidently with the world around them. By focusing on prevention and early intervention, empowering families and strengthening the workforce, we aim to close the SLC developmental gap that disproportionately affects children living in poverty.

Supporting the development of SLC is key to realising children's rights under the UNCRC, particularly their right to be heard, to express themselves and to reach their full potential.

The Scottish Government will lead efforts to embed early SLC outcomes across national policies, promote data-driven decision making and maintain clear accountability at all levels. We will work within existing frameworks and networks, making the most of established partnerships and resources to deliver meaningful improvements. Through the actions set out, the Scottish Government will set the strategic direction, ensure transparency and strengthen accountability in partnership with local authorities, NHS boards, and the third sector, who will play a vital role in delivering improvements on the ground.

Success depends on collaboration across sectors; government, local authorities, health services, education and the third sector, and crucially, on involving parents and carers as equal partners in this journey. By uniting our efforts, we can create a system that comprehensively and sustainably supports children's SLC development.

Together, we can give every child the foundation they need to thrive, improving their learning, social connections and future opportunities. We can build a Scotland where all children have the opportunity to develop the SLC skills they need to reach their full potential.

# Annex A – Chatting Together

## Chatting Together

The Chatting Together key messages and associated evidence-based strategies are already reflected across a range of existing services and resources. These include the Parent Club website, the Baby Box booklet (which offers advice on bonding with your baby), the Bookbug in the Home Activity Cards and the Child Health Record. The principles behind Chatting Together have also been embedded in Scottish Government-funded third sector family support offers, helping to promote consistent, strengths-based support for early communication development across Scotland.

### [Chatting Together: national early language and communication key messages](#)

Chatting Together consists of four **'most important things'** that adults can do every day to nurture little ones' early language and communication, while also lighting up their minds and creating a loving connection that will last a lifetime.

There are four 'most important things' for bump to baby stage, and four slightly adapted messages for toddlers and young children.

There are also four ideas to help families **'get ready' to chat together** by reducing distractions and background noise and encouraging multi-lingual parents to chat in their home languages.

## Getting Ready to Chat Together

- Let's chat and play every day.
- Help me to tune in by putting your phone away and turning off the TV.
- If I nap with a dummy, put it away when I am alert.
- Be sure to use your home language or languages.

## **Chatting Together: Bump to Baby**

### **1. Listen, watch and respond to me.**

I can't talk yet, but I have lots to tell you. Pay attention to my facial expressions, sounds and wiggles to find out how I am feeling or what I need. Help me settle with a calming lullaby or chat to me about what I am doing.

### **2. Use a sing song voice.**

I can recognise your voice before I'm born. Finding quiet times to chat, sing or tell me stories helps me feel happy and safe. Help me to tune in by using a sing song voice that goes up and down.

### **3. Our best place is face to face.**

Be at my eye level to help me to see you, and so you notice how I am feeling. Use smiles and a gentle voice to hold my attention. I might look away, but that's OK, I'll come back.

### **4. Copy my sounds, funny faces and gestures.**

When you copy me, I notice you are listening and that you want to keep the conversation going. I love it when you make me laugh by copying my gestures and gurgles, then pausing for me to take another turn.

## **Chatting Together: Toddler to Young Child**

### **1. Get down to my level.**

Be down at my level so you can clearly see my face and I can see yours. Pay attention to notice what my facial expressions, sounds and words are telling you.

### **2. Watch and wait before joining in.**

I love it when you play alongside me, letting me take the lead. Watch and wait to see how I choose to play and what I am interested in. Join in by making a comment or taking a turn. Give me plenty of time to respond.

### **3. Copy my sounds or words and add a bit more.**

When you repeat what I say, I know you are listening, and it helps to keep the conversation going. Your longer sentences help me to learn new words. Don't worry if I can't say all the sounds correctly just yet.

### **4. Talk to me whatever we are doing.**

Chat with me about whatever we are busy doing, whether I'm getting dressed or walking to nursery. Try to comment instead of asking questions. Give me time to take a turn, with or without words.

# Annex B – Connection with the Early Child Development programme

## Connection with the Early Child Development programme

This Action Plan also forms part of the wider Early Child Development (ECD) programme. Improving early speech, language and communication is central to reducing developmental concerns identified at the 27–30 month review, and therefore to achieving our Programme for Government commitment to reduce these concerns by a quarter by 2030. By strengthening communication as a foundational skill, we strengthen the whole system of early child development, creating the conditions for children to thrive in learning, in health, and in life.

### ECD Impact areas



**Support caregivers' well-being & capacity to provide nurturing care\***



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



**Integrate policies and services, ensuring they are evidence based, family centred and responsive to need**

### SLC Pillars: Alignment to ECD secondary drivers



**Leadership**

- 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
- Investment is optimised to reflect the evidence on primary prevention, addressing needs, inequity and enabling continuity of support
- Learning system enables evidence into practice reliably and consistently, and data are shared and used to link planning, monitoring and improvement



**Families & communities**

- Care givers have the knowledge and confidence to provide nurturing care
- People get trusted support at the right time, while needed, including preconception



**Skilled & supported workforce**

- Workforce supported to have the knowledge, confidence, resources and wellbeing to support families and caregivers to be able to provide nurturing care
- Policies and services that impact on early child development are integrated through a shared evidence base, common narrative and governance and communication structures



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