EVERY CHILD DESERVES THE RIGHT SUPPORT

Improving access to specialist education for children and young people with highly complex health, care, communication and learning needs in Scotland.







A POLICY BRIEFING

Prepared by

Craighalbert
Enabling Children to Achieve

Working with families and partners to deliver integrated learning, therapy and care across Scotland.

Craighalbert
KEY FEATURES

Supporting children and families across Scotland for over 35 years, a registered charity and Scottish Government Grant Aided Special School

Integrated learning, therapy & care delivered by our expert multi disciplinary team

Personalised programmes for children from birth to 19 years

OUR QUALITY

HMIE
Very Good in:

- Learning, Teaching and Assessment
- Raising Attainment and achievement

HMIE

2025 – 2028
Rights Respecting Schools
UNITED KINGDOM
unicef
Silver Rights Aware

Care Inspectorate

How good is our care, play and learning?	**5 – Very Good**
1.1 Nurturing care and support	6 – Excellent
1.3 Play and Learning	5 – Very Good
How good is our setting?	**5 – Very Good**
2.2 Children experience high quality facilities	5 – Very Good
How good is our leadership?	**5 – Very Good**
3.1 Quality assurance and improvement are led well	5 – Very Good
How good is our staff team?	**6 – Excellent**
4.3 Staff deployment	6 – Excellent

OUR IMPACT (2025/26)

43 Children and young people supported

20 Local authorities represented

83% School attendance rate

468 Early Intervention sessions delivered

29 Placing requests / enquiries

7 Current tribunal cases

OUR THREE NATIONAL ASKS

1. **National Commissioning**
   Develop a national commissioning model for centres of excellence delivering highly specialist education, therapy and care.

2. **Better National Data**
   Understand need, plan early and invest wisely for children's futures.

3. **Rights Based Decision Making**
   Ensure children's assessed needs and rights are at the heart of every decision.

FORWARD



Scotland has set an ambitious vision to be the best place for children to grow up. Through the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Scotland has strengthened its commitment to ensuring every child has the opportunity to learn, develop and fulfil their potential.

For children and young people with highly complex health, care, communication and learning needs, this means having access to the right education, therapy and care at the right time. Every child has the right to communicate, to learn and to thrive. Every family has the right to timely support that enables them to care for their child and live fulfilling lives.

At Craighalbert, we see every day the transformational impact that specialist support can have. We also see the challenges many families face in accessing that support.

Increasingly, families tell us they are navigating lengthy placing requests and tribunal processes before their child's needs are recognised. During this time, children can miss vital learning opportunities, while parents experience emotional and financial pressures, with many unable to sustain employment because appropriate provision is unavailable or delayed.

This briefing is not about one organisation or one local authority. It is about ensuring Scotland's ambition becomes a reality for every child. We believe there is an opportunity to strengthen national planning, improve consistency of access and place children's rights at the heart of decision making.

We hope this paper contributes to a positive national conversation and supports collaborative action to ensure every child with highly complex health, care, communication and learning needs has the opportunity to communicate, learn and thrive and that every family receives the right support, at the right time.

Heather Gray
Chief Executive Officer
Craighalbert

ABOUT CRAIGHALBERT

For over 35 years, Craighalbert has supported children and young people across Scotland with highly complex health, care, communication and learning needs, providing specialist, integrated support that enables them to access education, exercise their rights, participate fully and achieve their potential.

Too often, these children face significant barriers to accessing the right support at the right time, limiting their opportunities for inclusion, participation and achievement.



As a Scottish Charity and Grant Aided Special School, we provide integrated learning, therapy and care for children and young people from birth to 19 years.

Our model brings together education, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, nursing, care and family support within one integrated team.



OUR SERVICES INCLUDE:

- Early Intervention Programmes (0-5 years)
- Specialist Nursery (2-5 years)
- Specialist School (5-19 years)
- Therapy Services
- Nursing and Care
- Family Support and Training
- Transition Support
- Outreach, training, coaching and professional development for early years settings, schools and partner organisations.
- Representation on national groups, influencing policy and practice.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Every child has unique strengths and aspirations. For some children, highly specialist environments are essential to enable them to communicate, learn, participate and achieve their potential.



The right educational environment provides access to:

Integrated therapies
Speech & Language Therapy, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy and Nursing.

Highly qualified multidisciplinary teams

Specialist equipment

Specialist communication systems / AAC
(Augmentative and Alternative Communication) including approaches such as PODD.

Accessible learning environments

A personalised approach that recognises each child's individual abilities and needs

Nutrition
supporting specialist dietary requirements, including blended diet and texture modification.

Access to cutting-edge assistive technology



When children receive the right support at the right time, the impact extends far beyond education, improving health, wellbeing, family resilience and future opportunities

2025 – 2028
Rights Respecting Schools
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A NATIONAL CHALLENGE

Through our experience supporting families across Scotland, we are increasingly seeing children experience significant barriers in accessing specialist education provision, despite clear multidisciplinary evidence demonstrating need.

We are increasingly supporting families who experience:

- **Navigating complex placing request and tribunal processes**
- **Children placed in educational settings that are unable to fully meet their complex needs**
- **Placement breakdowns**



- **Significant impacts on family wellbeing**



- **Financial hardship and reduced employment opportunities**



- **Interrupted access to education**



- **Lost opportunities during critical stages of development**



These experiences have a profound impact not only on children, but on their families and the wider system. They affect children's ability to realise their rights, place considerable pressure on family wellbeing and finances, and increase demand on education, health and social care services.

Families often tell us the process is emotionally demanding, time consuming and financially challenging. For children, delays can mean lost opportunities to develop communication, independence and essential life skills during critical developmental periods.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS MUST REMAIN CENTRAL

Scotland has made a strong commitment to embedding children's rights through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).



Article 3

The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions affecting them.

Article 23

The rights of children with disabilities to enjoy a full and decent life, ensuring their dignity, self-reliance, and active participation in the community.

Article 28

Guarantees every child the right to education, emphasizing accessibility, equality, and respect for the child's dignity.

Article 29

Education should fully develop the child's personality, respect for human rights, cultural identity, and preparation for responsible life in society.

These principles are further supported through Scotland's Additional Support for Learning framework and GIRFEC approach.

We believe decisions regarding specialist education should always be informed by the child's assessed needs, professional evidence and rights.

SCOTLAND HAS COMMITTED TO...

These commitments demonstrate Scotland's ambition to be the best place to grow up, to provide inclusive, rights-based education for every child.

We believe children with the most complex health, care, communication and learning needs deserve the same ambition.

UNCRC (incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024

GIRFEC

The Promise

National Improvement Framework

Learning for Sustainability

learning for sustainability
supporting collaboration and adaptation

Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2024

WHY THIS NEEDS ATTENTION

We are seeing growing evidence that children with the most complex needs are not consistently recieving the rights-based support they require.

Families are increasingly required to navigate placing requests and tribunal processes to secure suitable provision.

Children's rights to communication, participation and appropriate support are not always being realised in practice.

A rights-based system must work for every child, including those with the most complex needs.

EMERGING THEMES FROM CRAIGHALBERT'S EXPERIENCES

Across multiple local authorities we are incresingly seeing common themes.

Growing demand
Increasing numbers of families seeking specialist education placements.

Longer placement journeys
More placing requests, more tribunals, longer decision making.

Workforce pressures
Nurseries and schools trying hard but often lacking training, confidence and specialist knowledge.

Planning challenges
Children are often known to health services long before education planning begins.

Lack of national data
No single picture of future need to support strategic planning and investment.

Lack of full and fair funding/National commissioning
Current funding and commissioning arrangements do not reflect the true cost of specialist, integrated support.

These principles are further supported through Scotland's Additional Support for Learning framework and GIRFEC approach.

getting it right for every child

These emerging themes highlight the need for earlier planning, stronger national coordination and rights-based decisions for children with highly complex needs.

THE HUMAN IMPACT
POPPY'S STORY



Poppy is a young child with Rett Syndrome whose communication, learning, health and care needs require a highly specialist and integrated approach. Her parents report that delays in securing what they believe to be an appropriate placement means she has lost opportunities for learning and development at a critical stage in her life.

Poppy's experience of Craighalbert's early intervention service demonstrates how she engages, communicates and responds when specialist support is embedded throughout her day.

Who is Poppy?

Poppy's parents describe her as a joyful, outgoing and curious four-year-old, a "social butterfly" who wants what every child wants: "to be seen and understood and to be a part of the world around her."

Poppy is non-verbal, uses a wheelchair and has lost most functional use of her hands. However, she has strong understanding and is learning to communicate through eye-gaze. She requires an integrated approach in which learning, communication, therapy and assistive technology are planned together.

Poppy has participated in our early intervention service for two years. Through activities incorporating AAC, assistive technology and therapeutic input, her family has seen her engage and communicate in ways they had not previously experienced. They believe Craighalbert provides the environment she needs to develop communication, confidence and independence and reach her full potential.

What has happened?



Poppy's parents first raised their wish for her to attend Craighalbert in April 2025 and submitted a formal placing request in August 2025. They report waiting almost six months for the request to be refused, despite repeated follow-up, and receiving no explanation of how the decision had been reached.

The subsequent tribunal process has also been subject to repeated delays. By the rescheduled hearing, the family will have waited approximately 17 months from their initial request and 13 months from their formal written request.

Her parents believe that, as a consequence, Poppy has lost an entire year in which she could have been accessing the specialist education they sought for her. Instead of beginning primary school at Craighalbert, she is returning for another pre-school year in a setting which they believe cannot provide the specialist expertise and support she requires.



Why does the delay matter?

Poppy's family has privately funded specialist speech and language therapy and physiotherapy. These professionals have identified slow progress in communication and physical development in areas where greater progress might have been expected with appropriate specialist support.



Her parents also describe significant concerns about access to eye-gaze expertise, specialist therapy and proactive multidisciplinary support within her current placement.

For a young child with complex neurological needs, time itself matters. The issue is not simply where Poppy attends school, but the learning opportunities potentially lost while adults and systems determine where and how her needs should be met.

The impact on the whole family

The financial and emotional costs have been substantial. Poppy's mother has scaled back her business and career aspirations, while her eight-year-old sister has required therapy to help her process her feelings and concerns about Poppy's wellbeing.

Her parents describe the cumulative impact as "devastating" and "soul destroying." Having already had to become carers, advocates and experts in their daughter's condition, they feel they are now having to fight an exhausting and complex system simply to secure the support they believe she needs.



The key message from Poppy's parents

"Look at children as individual human beings and not as a cost. Listen to families. Make the processes accessible, fair, and as quick and stress free as possible."

"Please give our daughter a chance. Please see her potential and do not just ask us to settle for 'good enough'. She deserves to thrive."

At the heart of this case is a child whose opportunities to communicate, learn and participate are time sensitive. Her parents are asking for her potential to be recognised and for the right specialist support to be in place while it can make the greatest difference.

The wider issue

Poppy's experience raises an important wider question:

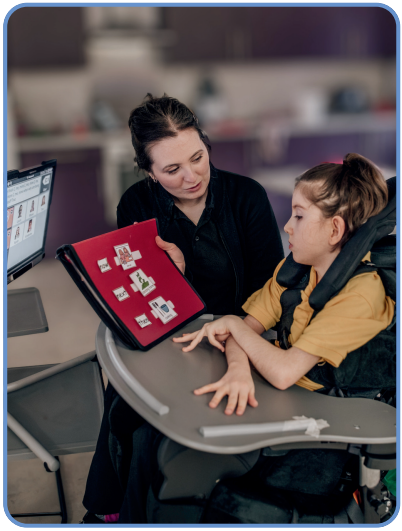


Do current placing request and ASN tribunal processes and timescales adequately protect children with complex additional support needs when opportunities for learning and development may be lost while disputes about educational provision remain unresolved?

OUR THREE NATIONAL ASKS

We would like to request these asks of you....

1 DEVELOP A NATIONAL COMMISSIONING MODEL FOR HIGHLY SPECIALIST EDUCATION



Scotland should develop a national commissioning approach for centres of excellence that provide highly specialist education, therapy and care for children and young people with the most complex health, care, communication and learning needs.

A nationally coordinated model would improve consistency and equity of access across Scotland, reduce variation in local decision making and support long-term sustainability of highly specialist services. It would also enable centres of excellence to play a wider national role in workforce development, research, innovation, training and the sharing of specialist expertise, helping to build capacity across mainstream and specialist education.

Consistency and Equity

Ensure consistent, equitable access for children across Scotland.

Sustainability and Value

Reduce variation in local decision making and support long-term sustainability of highly specialist services.

Workforce, Expertise and Innovation

Centres of excellence lead in workforce development, research, innovation, training and sharing expertise across Scotland.

National commissioning would ensure that access to highly specialist provision is based on a child's assessed needs rather than where they live.

OUR THREE NATIONAL ASKS

2 IMPROVE NATIONAL DATA COLLECTION AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

Scotland needs a comprehensive national understanding of the number of children and young people with complex communication, learning, health and care needs who require highly specialist support.



Currently, there is no consistent national dataset to inform workforce planning, service development or future commissioning. Many children are known to health services from an early age, yet education providers often become aware of their needs only when they approach nursery or school entry, limiting opportunities for effective planning and preparation. Improved national data collection and forecasting would enable earlier identification, better workforce planning, more strategic investment and the development of services that meet current and future demand.

Early Identification

Better data helps identify children's needs earlier, enabling timely support and improved outcomes.

Better Planning

Robust data underpins effective workforce planning and service development.

Smarter Investment

Accurate data supports strategic investment in services that meet current and future demand.

Better national data would enable earlier planning, better investment and a clearer picture of future need across Scotland.

OUR THREE NATIONAL ASKS

3 STRENGTHEN RIGHTS-BASED DECISION MAKING



Every child has the right to receive an education that enables them to communicate, learn and thrive. Decisions regarding specialist educational provision should be grounded in children's rights, informed by multidisciplinary professional assessment and centred on the individual needs of the child.

Too many families describe navigating complex placing request and tribunal processes before appropriate provision is secured. We believe decisions should be made as early as possible, using a collaborative, child-centred approach that places the best interests of the child at the heart of decision making and reduces the need for families to pursue lengthy and adversarial processes.

A consistent rights-based approach across Scotland would improve outcomes for children, reduce inequality and give families greater confidence that their child's needs are being recognised and met.

Children's Rights

Embed children's rights in all decisions about specialist education, ensuring every child has the right to communicate, learn and thrive.

Best Interests of the Child

Place the best interests of the child at the heart of decision making, informed by multidisciplinary professional assessment.

Earlier, Fairer Decisions

Make decisions as early as possible through a collaborative, child-centred process to ensure fair, timely and equitable outcomes.

Rights-based decisions would help ensure children receive the right support, in the right place, at the right time.

WHAT SUCCESS COULD LOOK LIKE

IMAGINE A SCOTLAND WHERE...







Every child is identified early.

Nurseries and schools are confident and prepared to support complex needs.

Families do not need to go through tribunals to access the right support.

Children access the right education without delay.

Specialist education provision is planned and commissioned nationally.

Children's rights are at the heart of every decision.

Success means making Scotland the best place to grow up for every child, including those with the most complex health, care, communication and learning needs.

The right support, in the right place, at the right time.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Real change will require national leadership, collaboration and a shared commitment to getting the right support in place for every child. We invite decision makers, influencers and partners to work with us to better understand the experiences of children and families, see specialist integrated practice in action, and help shape a more consistent, rights-based approach to highly specialist education across Scotland.

Visit Craighalbert and see integrated specialist education in practice.



Meet children, young people, families and staff to understand their experiences.



Champion children's rights in education.



Support improved national planning and data collection.



Explore opportunities for national commissioning of highly specialist education provision.



Help ensure every child has access to the right education at the right time.



WORKING TOGETHER FOR SCOTLAND'S CHILDREN

Craighalbert is committed to working in partnership with Scottish Government, Local Authorities, NHS boards, Education Scotland, the Children's Commissioner, third sector and families to create a more equitable, timely and rights-based system for children with the most complex needs.



GET IN TOUCH

We welcome conversations and collaboration. Please get in touch to find out more about our work or explore how we can work together for Scotland's children.

Craighalbert
Enabling Children to Achieve

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The Scottish Centre for Children with Motor Impairments
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The Scottish Centre for Children with Motor Impairments (known as Craighalbert) is a Scottish charity, SC008428, regulated by the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR). A Company limited by guarantee registered in Scotland No. 129291