Annual Report 2025/2026

STEPPING STONES
NORTH EDINBURGH
SUPPORTING YOUNG PARENTS



Contents

Message from the Chief Executive	4
Message from the Chair	5
Services at a Glance	6
Service Spotlight - Family Support	7
Family Journey	8
Group Work Highlights	10
Family Voice – Sparrow	12
Impact	14
Treasurers Report	16
Team and Trustees	17



"It's been really good to have someone to talk to. It's been hard with lots changing at home, but having somewhere to talk has really helped."

Child

Message from the Chief Executive

Morag Wilson

It has been a year of stability at Stepping Stones, with thanks to funders who have given us multi-year grants and supported the work of our organisation. This stability has created capacity within the team to delve into new pieces of work that can benefit the community and drive forward a strong early years voice in strategic spaces.

The team have been busy putting new training into practice, and we have since seen this come to fruition with a range of new groups, including our first Circle of Security programme, Decider Skills at Forthview Primary School, Peep for neurodiverse children, and an outdoor group in partnership with Earth Calling and Equilearn. The development of these new groups saw the team delivering over 10 groups per week during term time and has involved us taking on more space within another local third sector organisation. This has been a fantastic opportunity for Stepping Stones to expand our space, enabling us to better meet the growing demand from families. You can read more about some of these opportunities on page 10.



Our senior team has had more capacity to work at a strategic level. Working in partnership with City of Edinburgh Council's Parent and Carers Support Team, we formed a new early years community of practice in the North West locality. The community of practice supports those invested in a strong early years landscape to come together across sectors, build relationships, meet emerging needs, and share skills and learning. The team has also continued to engage with the Lothian Perinatal Collaborative, Lothian Association of Youth Clubs, and key working groups for the delivery of Edinburgh's Children's Services Plan. Engagement with families and through our Parents' Forum helps us to amplify the voices of those we support and highlight the changing needs and challenges within our community.

A personal highlight this year has been to witness the growth and development of the parents supported by Sparrow. The Sparrow group worked with Media Education to create two powerful short films about Sparrow and their experiences of living with social work involvement. The group showcased their films to a select audience and gained a qualification in Access to Media from Edinburgh College. The group then built on this learning and supported the delivery of a Sparrow event at Edinburgh's City Chambers to over 60 professionals, engaging in conversations and workshops to help influence practice and shift perspectives. Cheryl writes more about her support from Sparrow on page 12.

I see the courage and resilience of the Sparrow parents reflected in families across our organisation. We work alongside parents and children who, every day, are doing their best to navigate systems that are not always compassionate or person-centred, whilst striving to overcome challenges in their lives. As always, it has been our privilege to be chosen by children and parents as their safe space – a space to learn, play, and grow together.

Message from the Chair

Alastair Duncan

It has been "a year of stability", says Morag in her Chief Executive's report of this year. It is a year in which, to take just one aspect of our services, we have provided 469 group sessions; a year in which 343 families have engaged with our services. We took in just below £650,000 in income this past year to fund our services. As Roy says in his treasurer's report, we expect to provide services this coming year with a value of even more than that. Not bad for a year of stability. Not bad for a project that started 40 years ago with an income of around £2000.

Back in 1986, we started life as the Pilton Young Parent Project. In terms of numbers, we have come a long way since then. But in truth we have not gone anywhere. We are still here, still offering the same care and compassion to the same community. True, we changed our name. But what better name could we have chosen than Stepping Stones? Nothing could better capture the stability we offer. So, yes, a year of stability. Exactly what is required in a world that far too often provides the very opposite.

In the stories within this year's annual report you will see the care and compassion which our team continues to offer our families. You will see the stability that the team's helping hand brings. Please read the story of Stuart in the Family Journey section. And please read the story of Cheryl. Hear the difference that the incredible Sparrow project has made to her. These stories remind us just how powerful and transformative care and compassion can be.

Among the reflections the Board has had this year looking back on our 40-year history is the history of stability within the team. So many of our team members have come to us and stayed. This says much about them, and about the core values and solidity of the project. We see the same thing in the commitment of our parents, for example with our parent volunteer mentors and the parents' forum (and attending one of their meetings was a personal highlight for me this year...)

Tragically this year, we lost Sandra Cumming, a much-loved member of the Board. Sandra was hugely committed to Stepping Stones and to her community. The Board and the team will miss her kindness and wisdom.

During the course of the year we recruited a new board member. Linda Harper brings an experience and range of skills from business and from her professional involvement in the Children's Hearing system that has already been of great value to the project.

If you have read this far, thank you. Please read the rest of the report. The work of Stepping Stones is vital. It is transformative. If you are one of our funders or our supporters, thank you. There is no stability without you all.



Services at a Glance

Early Learning

- Our Early Learning team provide a range of group work and one-to-one supports for children under 5 and their parents.
- A range of group work sessions are delivered to support and enhance children's early learning and development.
- Support is designed to build confidence and nurture the parent-child relationship.

Bump Start

- Bump Start provides support to pregnant women and their families from conception through to the early postnatal months.
- Support is tailored to the individual needs of families and offers both practical and emotional support throughout the pregnancy journey.
- One-to-one support and group work opportunities promotes the holistic wellbeing of the family during pregnancy, enabling families to have better experiences during pregnancy and early parenthood.



Family Wellbeing

- The Family Wellbeing team encompasses a range of services from our BWell Together project which supports the mental health and wellbeing of children aged 5 plus, the Sparrow project which supports parents who have lost care of a child and holistic whole family support for families with a child under 5.
- Support is delivered across communities, taking place in family homes or local community settings and schools. Support is flexible and responsive to the changing needs of children and their families and helps to increase resilience, improve wellbeing and connect families with wider support networks.

Group Work

- We deliver an extensive group work programme throughout the project which includes groups such as Baby Steps and Toddler Steps delivered by our Early Learning team and a range of group work opportunities aimed at school age children including Equine Assisted Learning.
- A core component of our group work programme is our educational and life skill-based group work courses for parents. These include wellbeing focused groups, SQA accredited courses, and a range of employability focused groups. These courses provide parents with a safe space in which to re-engage in education and develop their confidence and skills.



Service Spotlight – Family Support

Supporting Family Wellbeing

We know that every family is unique, and that when parents feel supported, children are more likely to feel safe, happy and confident. Our Family Wellbeing Practitioners work alongside families through home visits and one-to-one support, offering practical and emotional help that is shaped around each family's individual needs and circumstances. By supporting parents, we help families build stronger relationships and create safe, nurturing homes where children can thrive.

Support in the Family Home

Our practitioners work alongside parents to build confidence, reduce barriers and support positive wellbeing for the whole family. For children, this can mean more settled routines, stronger parent-child relationships, greater emotional security and increased opportunities to participate in their community, learning and wider development.

Home visits provide an opportunity for families to receive support in a familiar and comfortable environment. Being invited into the family home can help practitioners build trusting relationships and gain a better understanding of the challenges a family may be facing.

Parents have the space to talk openly about issues such as housing concerns, financial difficulties and other pressures affecting their family life. Seeing a family's circumstances first hand can also help practitioners understand what support may be most helpful.

Most importantly, home visits give parents the opportunity to feel seen, heard and supported. We work alongside families without judgement, taking time to listen to their experiences.

The Family Wellbeing team have a range of evidence-based approaches underlying their practice, such as the Solihull Approach and trauma informed practice. The team's skills and experience help them to understand what sits behind behaviours and experiences that shape family life. This means families get practical support alongside a caring, thoughtful approach that helps families to make positive changes.

One to One Support

Our one-to-one support is delivered at the parent's pace and is shaped around their individual needs. Families will plan alongside their worker what their short term and longer-term goals are for their family. This can encompass practical support, emotional support to reflect on experiences and relationships, building parenting capacity and supporting children's development.

When a family needs specialist support beyond the capacity of the Family Wellbeing Practitioner, such as legal advice, we help parents access the appropriate service. This may include supporting them to make important phone calls, understand information or attend appointments alongside them.

Throughout the year, families have been supported to access a wide range of services, including iThrive drop-ins, Women's Aid, Citizens Advice, hospitals, housing services, education settings, Community Police and MSPs. Through our support we see families grow in confidence to engage with other services, helping to develop a wider support network for the family.

Connecting Families with Their Community

Supporting wellbeing is also about helping families feel connected to their local community. As part of our one-to-one work, practitioners introduce families to welcoming local spaces and facilities such as parks, libraries and community hubs. When families are ready, they can move on from one-to-one support and engage with our wide range of group work opportunities, helping to provide routine and structure for the family and supporting longer term change.

Family Journey

1. Background Information

Stuart is in Primary 5 at a local North Edinburgh Primary school. The school requested support to help Stuart regulate his emotions. Stuart lives at home with his Mum and Dad and his younger brother. Stuart's brother has additional health needs and at times this can cause Stuart to feel as though his needs aren't as important.

Stuart finds school quite difficult to manage and has low self-esteem. He can often become dysregulated and is at risk of being excluded, due to the nature of his behaviour.

2. Reasons for Support

Stuart needed support to

- Manage his emotions so that he was not putting himself or others in danger
- Build his confidence and self-esteem
- Talk about his homelife and how his brothers needs impact his family
- Engage with educational opportunities



3. Support Provided

- 1:1 sessions establishing trust, with a focus on building confidence and exploring emotions
- Time spent exploring alternative educational experiences
- Weekly Equilearn sessions
- Family support for Stuart's parents offering emotional and practical support
- Support focusing on reintegration into school

4. Changes Noted

As a result Stuart experienced:

- A positive weekly routine which positively impacted Stuarts confidence and self-worth
- Improved ability to manage his emotions. Working with the horses was particularly valuable and helped Stuart to develop calmer responses to social demands.
- More one on one time with his parents, as they worked hard to re-enforce a positive sense of self-worth and love at home
- Increased attendance and engagement at school

5. Evidence of Change

Stuart was able to progress from school exclusion to actively engaging in supports in a positive and constructive way. Stuart showed a real interest in learning new things and though this process we could see his confidence grow. As support progressed we could see Stuart was working hard to implement new skills that he was learning to help manage his emotions, this resulted in him being able to attend school more frequently and continue on with his primary education.

Group Work Highlights

Groups for Children

- Equilearn
- Schools Out
- Seasons for Growth
- Decider Skills
- Earth Calling

Parent and Child

- Pregnancy and Baby Cafe
- Baby Steps
- Steps to Grow
- Family Hub
- Baby Massage
- Relaxed PEEP

Parent Group Work

- Young Parents Group
- Employability Group
- Sparrow Group
- Introduction to Groupwork
- Decider Skills
- Circle of Security
- Seasons for Growth – for Parents
- Triple P

This year, Stepping Stones continued to deliver a range of group work across the community, supporting parents, children and families at every stage. Alongside our established programmes, we introduced Circle of Security Parenting in partnership with PAIRS NHS and delivered our first Decider Skills programme at Forthview Primary School, extending our reach into new settings and age groups.



Circle of Security Parenting

This year we were delighted to deliver our Circle of Security Parenting (COSP) programme in partnership with clinicians from PAIRS (Parent and Infant Relationship Service) NHS. This collaboration brings together Stepping Stones' relationship-based, community-focused approach with specialist expertise in perinatal and infant mental health, creating a safe and reflective space for parents.

Circle of Security is an evidence-based parenting programme that supports parents to better understand their child's emotional needs and behaviours while reflecting on how their own experiences can influence parenting. Through discussion, shared learning and guided reflection, parents explored how they can be a secure base from which their children can confidently explore the world and a safe haven to return to for comfort and reassurance.

Alongside developing new insights into attachment and emotional development, parents built supportive relationships with one another, reducing feelings of isolation and increasing confidence. The group encouraged self-compassion, helping parents recognise that they do not need to be perfect, but rather emotionally available and "good enough" for their children.

One parent reflected on the difference the programme had made, saying: "I feel much more confident being with my son now. I know how to calm him down, whereas before I let my husband do it because I dreaded his meltdowns."

The positive relationships developed within the group have encouraged families to continue engaging with wider Stepping Stones supports, strengthening community connections and promoting lasting improvements in parental confidence, emotional wellbeing and secure parent-child relationships.

Decider skills

We also delivered our first Decider Skills programme at Forthview Primary School. Decider Skills is an evidence-based approach that uses principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to help children and young people recognise and understand the connection between their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. The programme empowers participants to monitor and manage their emotions, build resilience and support their own mental health and wellbeing.

The group met weekly over 13 weeks, providing a safe and supportive environment where children could learn, practise and reflect on a new Decider Skill each session. Through interactive activities and discussion, participants developed emotional awareness and learned practical coping strategies that they could apply both in school and in their everyday lives.

The programme began with nine children, with six completing the full 13-week course. Those who completed the programme showed increased confidence in recognising and expressing their emotions, alongside a greater ability to use positive strategies to manage challenging situations.

Relaxed PEEP

In September 2025, the Family Hub ran a Relaxed PEEP group. Initially delivered as a six-week block, this was extended to twelve weeks due to demand from families and the clear positive impact it was having on both parents and children.

The group was aimed at children under five and their parents, offering an inclusive stay and play space where adults could access peer support while supporting their child's learning and development through play, songs and stories.

All the children had either received an autism diagnosis or were at varying stages of the diagnosis process. Parents accessed support from facilitators, who offered advice, signposting and modelling of play and learning opportunities. Families also benefited from sessions facilitated by Tailor Ed, who provided guidance on play, development, sleep and nutrition, and from a visit by NHS Speech and Language Therapists, giving parents the chance to ask questions and get tailored advice.

Parents shared how beneficial the group had been, describing it as a free, inclusive space where their child could play somewhere suitable and welcoming for them. They valued the support from facilitators and guest specialists, as well as the peer support from other families in similar situations. All parents noticed a positive change in their child since joining the group and felt more motivated and confident in the strategies they could use to support them going forward.



Family Voice – Sparrow

SPARROW

Sparrow is a city-wide project, delivered in partnership between Stepping Stones, Circle and City of Edinburgh Council's Family Group Decision Making team. Sparrow deliver support to parents who have had a child permanently removed from their care.

Below, Cheryl tells her story of the impact Sparrow's support has had on her life and the opportunities it has created for her.

I first started working with Sparrow in January 2023, and looking back now, I honestly don't think I'd be the person I am today without it.

When I was first referred to Sparrow, I was carrying so much. Like many parents, I was trying to be strong for my children while quietly struggling myself. I often felt alone, like nobody really under- stood what my life was like or the battles I was fighting every day but from the moment I walked through the doors, Sparrow made me feel welcome. I was never judged and was accepted exactly as I was. Sparrow gave me the space to be myself - to laugh again, to cry when I needed to, and to realise that I wasn't alone.

The group has become such a big part of my life over the last two and a half years. Whether it was arts and crafts, family trips, or simply sitting with a cup of tea chatting to other parents, every session reminded me that there were people who understood and I wasn't fighting my battles on my own anymore. The friendships I've made through Sparrow are friendships I'll always treasure. We've laughed together, cried together, supported each other, and celebrated each other's achievements. They aren't just people I met at a group, they're people who have become part of my support system and family and have helped me through some of my hardest days.



I want to thank my workers for believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself. You've encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone, reminded me of my strengths when I could only see my weaknesses, and never gave up on me. Your kindness, patience, and support have meant more than you'll ever know.

Sparrow has given me so many opportunities to have my voice heard and to help shape how parents experiencing what I have been through are supported. I never imagined I'd have these opportunities. I completed Trauma Training which helped me understand not only my own experiences but also how I can better support my children. I attended the Martha's Mammies Hope focus group in Glasgow, contributed to the Wellbeing Box focus group by sharing my experience and took part in two creative writing sessions that helped me find my voice. One of the things I'm most proud of was being asked to be a panel member at the 'Voices for Change' event. Speaking in front of people used to terrify me, but Sparrow gave me the confidence to stand up and share my story. I was also invited to attend a Sparrow information event for professionals and asked to speak about the work Sparrow does and how it has helped me. I was incredibly proud to participate in making two films with other Sparrow parents; 'Sparrow Group' and 'Living with Social Work', alongside Media Education. Being able to share our experiences and then watch the films with our friends and families at the showcase event was something I'll never forget.

I was also lucky enough to receive emotional support and a grant to better my life for my children. That support gave me the opportunity to invest in my own wellbeing, because I've learned something so important through Sparrow.

Looking after myself isn't selfish.

When I'm emotionally stronger, my children have a happier, healthier mum. Bettering myself means giving them the best version of me, and that's one of the greatest gifts I can give them. Sparrow hasn't just helped me through difficult times. It has helped me discover who I am. It has given me confidence, purpose, friendships, opportunities, and hope. Most importantly, it has shown me that asking for help isn't a weakness, and that no-one must face life's challenges alone.

To everyone at Sparrow, to every parent who's sat beside me, shared a smile, a tear, or a hug, THANK YOU. Thank you for believing in me until I could believe in myself. Everything I've achieved over the last two and a half years has been because someone reached out and reminded me that I mattered. I'm not just surviving anymore, I'm living, growing, and becoming the mum my children deserve because of Sparrow.

Cheryl Hamilton

circle
Supporting families in Scotland

EDINBVRGH
THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL

Thank you to our partners Circle and Family Group Decision Making (City of Edinburgh Council) for working alongside us to deliver the Sparrow project.

"I feel that the Sparrow service is vital in supporting families who are experiencing trauma when they have experienced their children being in the looked after and accommodated system."
Social Worker

Impact

343
families engaged in support

73%
of families reported improved emotional wellbeing

469
group work sessions

360
onward connections made for families

"We have seen percentages rise in attendance with the involvement of Stepping Stones. The sessions have also allowed children to build a more positive relationship with school."
Head teacher



"I've left group feeling more knowledgeable, it's always good to learn something new. But I also love just having a break and chatting with other Mums"
Parent

75%
reported improved social networks

59%
of children felt more included

76%
of families reported improved parental confidence

83%
reported improved finances



61%
of children feel as though they have achieved more

Treasurer's Report

Roy Craig

Stepping Stones has had financial results in line with what was budgeted, utilising funds awarded to maintain the services that we provide, detailed in this report. The financial results for 25/26 resulted in surplus of £10,152. We continue to maintain a diversified funding stream and are very grateful to all funders who enable us to continue to provide an invaluable service of care and holistic support to the local community in a safe environment.

For 2026/27, Stepping Stones is budgeted to receive income of £610,018, resulting in a projected deficit of £65,229. The board is comfortable progressing with this budget as there are sufficient fund balances from restricted funds which will be utilised to cover this deficit.

Thanks to our funders

- Cattanach
- Capital City Partnership
- City of Edinburgh Council
- CMHW
- Corra Foundation
- Henry Duncan
- KPE4
- Mazars
- Mercers
- National Lottery
- Henry Smith
- RS MacDonald
- Robertson Trust
- Ronald Miller
- Royal Company of Merchants of City of Edinburgh
- University of Edinburgh
- Whole Family Wellbeing Fund
- William Dawson Trust



Team and Trustees

Stepping Stones Team

- Morag Wilson
  Chief Executive
- Claire Chalmers
  Senior Family Wellbeing Practitioner
- Kerry Riddell
  Senior Family Wellbeing Practitioner
- Mubarra Ashfaque
  Senior Family Wellbeing Practitioner
- Zoe Jordan
  Business Manager
- Sarah McLelland
  Early Learning Practitioner
- Ellen Stevens
  Early Learning Practitioner
- Stacy McKenzie
  Early Learning Practitioner
- Jillian Lonnie
  Early Learning Practitioner
- Joanne Findlay
  Family Wellbeing Practitioner – Outreach
- Ali McIlhone
  Family Wellbeing Practitioner
- Tiam Lithgow
  Family Wellbeing Practitioner
- Bethany Braidwood
  Family Wellbeing Practitioner
- Gill Dudgeon
  Family Wellbeing Practitioner
- Emily McKinnon
  Family Wellbeing Practitioner – Group Work
- Louisa Heaney
  Bump Start Practitioner
- Anna Chaney
  Bump Start Practitioner
- Aimee McKewan
  Family Wellbeing Practitioner – BWell Together
- Hoa Le
  Family Wellbeing Practitioner – BWell Together
- Liam Budler (left May 2025)
- Hope Lockwood (left June 2025)
- Clare Mommessin (left October 2025)
- Abi Sinclair (left October 2025)
- Laura Murray (left December 2025)

Trustees

- Alastair Duncan
  Chair
- Russell Bradley
  Depute Chair
- Roy Craig
  Treasurer
- Pat Haikney
  Secretary
- Ailene Preston
- Sandra Cumming
- Emma Davidson
- Linda Harper
- Jaymee Gorrie
  (resigned April 2025)
- Ian Moir
  (resigned October 2025)
- Pauline McPherson
  (resigned October 2025)

Volunteer Parent Mentors

- Shannon Borthwick
- Marcia Cruz

Parents Forum

- Shannon Borthwick
- Marcia Cruz
- Robyn Raiker
- Vicky Kerr
- Marta Mendendez Bermejo

STEPPING STONES
NORTH EDINBURGH
SUPPORTING YOUNG PARENTS



Design by elkethompson.com

Registered Office
G3, Inchgarvie Court
Ferry Road Drive
Edinburgh EH4 4DA
t 0131 551 1632
e info@steppingstonesnorthedinburgh.co.uk
w www.steppingstonesnorthedinburgh.co.uk **Insta** @steppingstonesne

Registered in Scotland as a Private Company Limited by Guarantee No. SC281866. Charity No. SC021775