

Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services Response from Children in Scotland

General

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to comment on the future delivery of public services; we have contributed extensively to the development of policy and the body of knowledge in respect of achieving best outcomes for children, and how public services can be instrumental in achieving them. Our comments will, in general, reflect our view of how children's interests would best be served; we would, however, wish to emphasise that we see the degree of priority accorded to meeting the needs and promoting the interests of children, particularly in their earliest years, as one of the most important factors in fulfilling the remit of the Commission. The provision of effective support to families means that children grow up with optimism and positive choice and avoid (often predictable) difficulties. A fundamental shift in policy, strategy and delivery, giving this approach centrality and priority, has the potential to change outcomes for the better across the whole population, and at the same time generate significant savings in particular areas of public expenditure. The body of evidence for this approach is now both substantial and indisputable.

Achieving positive outcomes

Outcomes in public services, firstly, must be defined as the achievement of positive and sustainable change brought about by the intervention provided by those services. The provision of a service is not, in itself, an outcome for a child or family. There are certainly elements of public services that can be shown to perform effectively; a real difficulty, however, is that information that demonstrates change, for good or ill, and clearly establishes some degree of attributability to the intervention, is often not available or is too unspecific. To quote from Audit Scotland's recent report on residential child care "Councils cannot demonstrate that they are achieving value for money in residential child care without knowing the real costs and the outcomes achieved for the children and young people."¹. Judging the quality of outcomes, without such data, is difficult; making strategic decisions without it is at best inefficient and at worst

¹ Getting it right for children in residential care (Audit Scotland, September 2010)

dangerous. We would therefore like to emphasise the importance of good, relevant management information in determining outcomes and supporting good decision-making.

Research evidence is also important in ensuring that best use is made of public funds. Children in Scotland's recent research project 'Working for Inclusion' looked at children's pre-school experience in several European countries. It was evident that significantly better outcomes were achieved in countries with universally available, integrated pre-school education and childcare, where staff were qualified to degree level². Minimising the risk of later problems and costly interventions contributes substantially to the financial sustainability of public services. Good early support provides benefits that have positive and life-long impact on education, health and well-being.

We are, of course aware of the statutory duties placed on public bodies and the limitations this can place on strategic decision-making. We would, however, argue that more innovative, creative and responsive approaches can be taken to the discharge of statutory functions, particularly if information on what works, and what does not, underpins resource allocation decisions. Outcomes for young people leaving residential care, for example, are significantly better in Germany and Denmark than they are in Scotland. This is despite the fact that staff/child ratios are substantially lower, though again the staff are better qualified (usually as a social pedagogue) and turnover is much lower. Better outcomes could therefore be achieved, and statutory duties more effectively fulfilled, by having fewer but better trained staff. Mainstreaming what has been found to work well in pilot and time-limited projects (within and outwith the public sector) should also happen more often than it does.

While user and stakeholder involvement have become prevalent in many public service activities, the prevalence of empowerment and support is not necessarily consistent with this. In order to feel empowered and supported involvement must demonstrably inform and influence decision-making, and concern issues that matter to people. This is particularly important where service users and stakeholders are disadvantaged through economic, social or health circumstances.

It is clear from the increasing incidence of many social and health problems that, taken as a whole, the public sector is failing to prevent or indeed reduce them. Alcohol, drug and mental health problems have been increasing over many years, as have crimes of violence. Our most vulnerable children too often repeat a pattern of poor parenting leading to poor outcomes (and substantial cost to the public purse) when they become parents themselves. Despite massive additional investment in the education system by government at all levels, improvement in educational outcomes has not been proportionate, and those children furthest

² Working for Inclusion (Children in Scotland, December 2010)

away from educational success have drifted even further away. Changes to early years health provision, with a move away from universal health visiting to very targeted intervention, has resulted in fewer families getting the help they need at the right time. At the same time, some costly 'high tariff' interventions, such as custodial sentences for offenders, while being used increasingly, are singularly ineffective in bringing about sustainable change. Of the current population of Polmont YOI, over 88% are serving a second or subsequent sentence, at an average cost per year of £41,000 per prisoner³.

Delivery models are much less important than what is done, and what impact services have. There are, however, a couple of key points of which any model should take account. Firstly, there should be a 'level playing field' in terms of service provision and commissioning. The public sector as provider should not be the default position. Services should be provided by whoever can deliver the most effective outcomes with the most efficient use of public funds. Of course this requires collection of data, as stated above, that can provide this information across all sectors of provision. Secondly, better integrated services produce better results. While management structures are part of this, communication, collaboration and shared planning at all levels are much more important.

Supporting delivery

Probably the main challenge facing public services both at present, and looking to the future, is how to respond to continually increasing demand. Continually increasing supply is neither an affordable nor a sustainable response. The only other possibility is therefore to reduce demand. We know that early intervention, in particular in the very earliest years of life, will incrementally reduce demand for social work and health services, for additional support in education, and for police and criminal justice provision. Key features of such early intervention would include

- Education about good parenting and child care, long before these become a reality
- Health services that promote and provide good health care for women before, during and after pregnancy
- Robust parental leave policies
- Parenting support and education for all parents, ensuring that those at highest risk or in greatest need are sufficiently and proportionately supported
- Provision of community based services that support children's learning and development, particularly in the 0 – 3 period when the most significant brain development in life takes place
- Integrated, high quality, affordable early education and childcare, available to all pre-school children, to promote learning, development and well-being, support good parenting and facilitate parental employment

³ Scottish Prison Service, 2010

- A skilled, qualified workforce capable of delivering the needed services.

It is no accident or coincidence that three recent significant reports – notably the Scottish Parliament Finance Committee’s Preventive Spending Inquiry and two prepared for the UK Cabinet – all conclude unequivocally that public funds would be far more effectively spent at this stage in life than at any other. It is clear that the massively increased investment in school education over the past twelve years has not resulted in proportionate improvement in performance, nor has the gap between the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged decreased. It is also clear that the move away from universal health surveillance in the early years has resulted in more children ‘falling through the net’, thus failing to get the right help at the right time. A recent study by Glasgow University underlines this⁴, while both the OECD report ‘Starting Strong II’⁵ and the NESSE report⁶ produced in 2009 for the European Commission conclude that those countries that invest most in early education and childcare, and provide it on a universal basis, achieve the best results in education, health and social terms.

Commissioning processes are unlikely to ensure optimum service quality if, as mentioned above, the outcomes achieved by services are not known for all potential providers. An equitable approach should underpin all commissioning activity thus ensuring the best return on the investment of public money. The relationship between public services and those from whom they commission services must be fair, clear and open. Real and meaningful partnership is not possible when, for example, voluntary sector agencies are dependent on the statutory bodies with whom they are in ‘partnership’ for their continued existence.

User involvement must become a routine part of mainstream service provision; an example of this would be involving school pupils in all aspects of school life from setting rules and discipline, to organising the timetable, to the menu for the school dinners, as opposed to periodic costly surveys or events, or having a pupil council where the agenda never includes the matters of the greatest importance and relevance to pupils. Children in Scotland’s recent research on pupil councils⁷ highlights these concerns, though parallel examples can be found across all user groups.

As we have already articulated, we believe investment in the early years, and a public service structure that supports this effectively, is the wisest use of limited resources. While we believe that public services have the over-arching

⁴ Parenting Support Framework Pilot Evaluation (Glasgow University/NHS Glasgow March 2010)

⁵ Starting Strong II (OECD, 2006)

⁶ Early Childhood Education and Care, Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training (European Commission, 2009)

⁷ Having a Say at School (Children in Scotland, 2010)

responsibility for providing this, we strongly support the role and importance of voluntary and community organisations, both in enhancing the range of provision, and in developing organisational capacity among individuals and communities. In the longer term, we would again argue that early investment will be far more likely to result in future generations having the competence and confidence to contribute to their communities and to society in general.

It is certainly the case that the absence of co-terminous boundaries complicates local planning and compromises service responsiveness, when, for example an NHS Board covers several local authorities, or a Community Health Partnership covers a slightly different area from a local authority neighbourhood. We also believe there is a compelling case for wholly integrated early years services, including health.

Inflexibility in financial arrangements can contribute to the complexity in planning for major strategic change, such as the 'transformational change' aspired to in Scottish Government/CoSLA's Early Years Framework. The rigidity of the statutory framework underpinning service delivery can also inhibit creativity and innovation in provision.

Public accountability is the other side of the user involvement coin. Both can only be optimised by the provision of reliable and accessible information, and both should be integral to the ethos of public service provision. It is essential that public bodies acknowledge and respect both elements; consulting on a proposal to close a school must be accompanied by transparent decision-making and clear communication of how the consultation/involvement process has impacted on the final decision.

In terms of national and local accountability, there are clearly areas of activity to which only government at national level can be held accountable. When delivery in support of a national policy takes place at more local level, there should be explicit and ambitious expectations agreed as to how and what the local bodies contribute. Single Outcome Agreements have not, by and large, set challenging local targets, nor have they prioritised effectively among the (often hundreds) of actions and intended outcomes.

We have outlined above some of the shortcomings of public service performance data and believe addressing these is critical to better understanding of outcomes, hence better knowledge of what is effective. We believe that relationships among sectors of provision should be based on this knowledge rather than inflexible ideology. This should not, however, be a pretext for erosion of staff terms and conditions or of 'closeness to the customer'.

In respect of the relationship between devolved and reserved matters, the separation between responsibility for the tax and benefits system (reserved) and other key matters of policy for children and families is profoundly unhelpful and

restricting. The quote below from Lord Sutherland, from an interview published in 'Children in Scotland' magazine, highlights the need to address this discrepancy⁸.

The overall context is that devolution went through and I think everyone thought that parts of it would have to be tidied up. But various aspects of devolution — most obviously the West Lothian question — are still troubling them. One specific aspect of this was what you do about budgeting when there are net savings to consider. It's a civil service-wide problem because you know if you make a saving in one department a spending department doesn't benefit from that, and that leaves a lot of bad practice. But this was an example where it wasn't just between departments but between, effectively, governments or executives. That kind of tidying up needs to continue — there are still lots of gremlins in there.

We believe absolutely that objective assurance of quality is an important aspect of service provision. We are less clear that the volume and intensity of current activity can demonstrate that its added value in terms of service improvement is in line with its costs. As well as the costs of external scrutiny bodies, public services often have extensive internal regimes and invest substantial time and resources in preparing for external inspection.

Public services are, of course, capable of inventiveness and imagination in planning and service delivery. This does not, unfortunately, occur as often as possible or desirable, nor is the evidence and research base used as systematically as it should be.

Over the years, many changes and reforms have taken place in public services. Comparative information on how different systems perform is difficult, given that they rarely co-exist in an identical context. It is probably true to say, however, that in general they have focused on structures rather than starting with identifying the issues to be addressed and configuring services in a responsive and effective way. We have mentioned the evidence in support of service integration for children above. The important point is that this evidence is based on what children need, and where and how they do best, rather than a rigid view about hierarchy and management.

We believe that public services have a moral responsibility (underpinned, in some cases, by legislation) to promote equality and fairness. As we have said throughout this submission, we believe these values would be well served by realignment of resources and priorities in support of good early years services. This would benefit all children, but would generate the greatest positive change for those in greatest need. Services based on rights and entitlements for parents and children will support and empower them in ways that 'one-off' events and activities will not. The ethos that should underpin public services should be, wherever possible to prevent harm, to ensure that everyone has an equal chance

⁸ 'Blue Sky Thinking' Children in Scotland magazine October 2006

to do well, and that public funds are used as wisely and constructively as possible in so doing.

We would be happy to answer questions about, or expand upon any of these points.

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Children in Scotland is the national umbrella agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents more than 400 members, including 90% of Scottish local authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and Europe.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It also services groups such as the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland). In addition, Children in Scotland hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve: ASL, Scotland's largest independent education mediation service.