

Response to Home Office, UK Border Agency Family Migration consultation

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Family Migration consultation.

Children in Scotland is the national umbrella organisation for the entire children's sector in Scotland. Our 400+ members range from large children's charities and local authorities to community-based groups and individual organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors. www.childreninscotland.org.uk

Family Migration is a reserved matter, but, of course, such decisions taken at Westminster will significantly affect children and families in Scotland.

Children in Scotland is not an expert on current and proposed immigration rules, and therefore we prefer not to comment on the detailed questions raised. However, through our membership, and through our wide European network (for example, our active participation in Children in Europe and Eurochild), we are expert on how young children and their families from outwith the UK could and should be considered and treated. Accordingly, we raise three fundamental points, which we urge the Westminster government to take into account.

First, we challenge the assumption that underlies this consultation, i.e. that differences (and particularly, differences of language) are negative and problematic, rather than enriching and full of potential for enhancing learning and community life. Second, we assert the need for a fundamental improvement in family services across the UK that would enable the better integration of migrant families within society, as well as benefiting *all* families. Third, we remind you of the importance of considering children's perspectives in any changes to the law.

Valuing difference

Children in Scotland is the English language publisher of *Children in Europe* magazine. We have posted to you, with a copy of this consultation response, issues 12 and 13, 'In my own words' and 'Multiple belongings'. These include articles from across Europe that reflect on how – in our increasingly global and multicultural environment – diversity, including the ability to speak more than one

language, and understand more than one culture, is a valuable asset to communities, rather than a drain on resources.

There is a danger that the family migration consultation, in making English language ability *before entry* a requirement will have the effect of unfairly penalising children (and adults) with strong contributions to make to our society.

It is also worth reflecting on the freedom afforded to British citizens to travel and move to other countries – often without necessarily being able to speak the native language on arrival. They often have eventually been able to contribute to their new society. This positive history has been repeated by many past immigrants to the UK, too. Finally, new languages are more easily acquired by those who already have more than one language, which is often the situation for migrant families desiring to come to the UK.

Better integration through improved family services

The consultation seeks advice on how better to provide support for integration of migrant families and reduce the ‘burdens on taxpayers’.

Investment in universal, high quality, and subsidised, early childhood education and care (which includes the necessary systems for Scotland to be able to determine funding and subsidy nationally) would enable the better integration of all families into society. This would be to the benefit of migrant families, as well as to long-resident minority ethnic families and non-minority disadvantaged families. A major European research programme led by Children in Scotland, found that universal, high quality, subsidised early childhood education and care was more likely to be associated with low child poverty and high child wellbeing. It was also more likely to positively include migrant and minority ethnic families.

Research publications can be read online here www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi

We draw your attention to the full research report:

<http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/WFIFinalReportDecember2010.pdf>

as well as the two reports specific to issues of diversity and integration:

http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/WFI_Div_Rep.pdf

http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/WFIDiv_Rep.pdf

Parental involvement with their children’s learning early on brings them into contact with mainstream services, as well as providing opportunities to mix with other families locally. This has benefits not only for migrant families who may be less familiar with local systems, but also for all those families who are currently less likely to access services that are ‘targeted’ at particular communities.

Grandparents, often crucial in providing childcare to enable parents to work, can be isolated and unsupported in their important role and perhaps less aware or confident about accessing local support services.

Playgroups and drop ins, as well as part and full time early childhood education and care services, can lead to all (not just migrant) parents and grandparents developing increased confidence, better skills, qualifications, and involvement in volunteering and peer support. These are services that would benefit whole communities, aid employability, and lessen the need for benefits.

Seeking and understanding children's perspectives

Children often become the *de facto* translators in migrant families, sometimes having to deal with complex and troubling situations, such as managing refugee status, social housing and welfare benefits. Attempts to protect children from these responsibilities can lead to them becoming (and being viewed merely as) passive victims of adult systems. While it is important to ensure translation services are available, it is also important to value children's skills and abilities in managing these different cultures, and adult relationships, and take an asset-based approach to developing a child's – and a family's – strengths, rather than focusing on perceived deficits.

It also should be noted that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (to which the UK is a signatory Member State) contains a variety of points relevant to this consultation. For example, Article 12 expresses the right the children to be as meaningfully and fully involved in decisions affecting their lives as their capabilities allow. Consultations with the children of recent immigrants to the UK would offer valuable insights for UK policy and practice.

Finally, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families, Tim Loughton, representing the UK at the Council of the European Union, recently formally adopted the recommendations of the European Commission's *Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care* [COM(2011)66]. While we encourage the UK Government to look to Denmark for guidance on systems for the provision of early childhood education and care, we are concerned that Denmark's recently changed immigration policy does not match or live up to its longstanding strategy of universal support for young children and families. Thus, Denmark's new immigration policy is not one that should be emulated by the UK.

The UK has a long history of tolerance, openness and an ability to incorporate many languages and cultures without considering these to be a threat to national identity. Indeed, past immigrants have made – and continue to make – diverse, significant and positive contributions to virtually all aspects of life in the UK. We encourage UK migration policy to continue to build on this strong asset.

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.