

IDEAS FOR A FAIRER SCOTLAND

Response from Children in Scotland

Children in Scotland is pleased to contribute to the second stage consultation. We believe that there is a substantial body of evidence that conclusively demonstrates that providing support at the earliest stages in a child's life is likely to effect positive change in respect of many of the issues of concern – health inequalities, drug and alcohol misuse, educational failure, crime and unemployment - set out in the consultation document. Our comments below relate to how services for children could be developed so that we do come nearer to 'getting it right for every child', but also experience benefits to our society and communities generally.

1. Prevention is always better than cure

Continuing to deliver services that are primarily provided in response to harm/problems having already occurred not only delivers limited positive impact, but is economically unsustainable. For this reason investment in preventive and supportive community based provision is the most effective way to address concerning issues. The repertoire of provision would include intensive ante-natal care, promotion of effective attachment and bonding, support for good parenting and holistic support for children and families integrated with child care and nursery education. Services need to be provided to avoid risks becoming problems, so duration and intensity as well as volume and diversity have to be considered.

2. Knowing the risks

Ensuring that we have a clear understanding of where risk is likely to occur, and to take active steps to minimise it. While we cannot predict with 100% accuracy which children will experience difficulties, we can certainly identify the degree of risk in many cases, based on the incidence of factors correlated with bad outcomes balanced against those correlated with good outcomes. This is about statistical probability, not about labelling people. We seem to take more seriously and address more effectively the risk of someone tripping

over a broken paving stone than the risk of a child ending up poor, failing in education and involved in criminal activity.

3. Positive futures for all

Decreasing the incidence of pregnancies where the baby is likely to be at risk. Obviously not all of these can be known about but there are particular groups eg young single women in deprived communities, parents with learning disabilities, parents who have drink, drug or mental health problems, where the likelihood of problems is higher than average. For example, many of these young parents do not see many other positive options open to them in their adult life. This needs to be addressed both through the education system and through community development activity. There are many examples of effective practice in Scotland and elsewhere but too many of them here are small-scale and on insecure funding.

4. Get it right for every child

Providing good quality services for young children and their families and ensuring that these are protected during periods of economic stringency. Again there are many examples of effective methodologies e.g. there is a good range of well-evidenced parenting programmes and many examples of practical family support. One size does not fit all and it is essential that solutions are actually specifically tailored to address the problems. These are better delivered within the context of universal provision where every child/family's needs can be provided for through flexible additional support and a workforce that can provide early education and childcare in an inclusive way. There are without doubt skill development implications, though refocusing social work on helpful intervention rather than what amounts to little more than surveillance would help.

5. Keep an eye on the ball

Ensuring that systems are in place to identify early changes to a child's circumstances that may increase the degree of risk to which they may be subject. Parents can separate, significant adults may develop health or substance misuse problems, peer groups and influences may change. Once again there are many examples of effective services for children at different ages, stages and circumstances.

6. Do what works and stop what doesn't

Making sure that those children whose lives have already been blighted by adversity receive services that work in changing their lives for the better. There is a wealth of research that can guide us in this respect. If we are not clear that there is persuasive evidence for the effectiveness of an intervention,

we should not be delivering it. We also need to prioritise and plan effectively. For some children, for example, entry to residential care can increase the likelihood of their involvement in offending behaviour.

7. Being looked after before being 'looked after'

While the outcomes for looked after children remain of great concern, generally the circumstances which existed prior to their becoming looked after are much more significant risk factors than their 'looked after' status. This is another reason for earlier provision of community-based services.

8. Little people, big difference

Investing in good early years services is probably the most rational course of action and at present is even more important as pressure on high-tariff services increases. Children who become serious and persistent offenders in their teens have in many cases already developed behaviour predictive of this before they are five. Vocabulary and language begins to show huge divergence between social classes at around age 2. The most important brain development takes place before three. Even genetic predispositions can be positively affected by intervention pre-three. Some interventions can show positive impact in pre-school and early primary school (Bookstart is a good example), thus it is by no means always the case that the impact is not perceptible except in the very long term. The Growing Up in Scotland study shows that persistent poverty in young children is highly correlated with other risk factors and that this group of children are already, in Primary 1, showing a much greater incidence of behavioural problems, peer and adult relationship difficulties, and are falling behind educationally.

We hope these comments are useful and would be happy to provide further information.

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Children in Scotland is Scotland's national 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.