

Key points: Children in Scotland Annual Conference ***Life in the fast lane: the road to better outcomes for children and young people***

The purpose of the conference was to identify key areas of policy and practice that will make a substantial and noticeable difference to the life chances and opportunities of children, young people and their families in the next decade. Along with a particular focus on Single Outcome Agreements as part of a broader approach to planning effective service delivery, the conference looked at the need for a shared vision and collaborative working among service providers across the whole sector, and how best to achieve this in challenging economic times. The conference was also the occasion for the launch of Scotland's new Children's Forum by Minister for Children and Early Years, Adam Ingram.

Among the key points raised were:

- It is important to develop a clear, shared vision for both services and communities that puts children and families at the centre, that is developed with and owned by them, and which is focused on helping children to enjoy childhood now as well as helping them develop skills and abilities for the future.
- There is a risk of the potential effectiveness of Single Outcome Agreements being lost in the process by being used to measure what is measurable, rather than measuring what matters. There is a tendency to focus on the short term, and for the human dimension to be lost in the proliferation of targets. However the opportunities presented for partnership working, shared aims and joint action have the potential to contribute to a 'one-team' approach that could help make the most effective use of available resources in challenging economic times.
- A 'one-team' approach applied across the whole range of services in the children's sector would avoid the fragmentation of services that leads to discontinuities in the lives of children, young people and their families. It should also be recognised that there are many drivers of social changes, not only services.
- Listening to children's voices more effectively and representing them accurately and meaningfully should be a priority. City of Edinburgh Council's Children's Partnership had its vision informed by the views of 1000 children, who emphasised the need to place greater emphasis on helping them to have a good childhood as part of their preparation for adulthood.

- Universal services should be strengthened as a means of ensuring essential provision consistently reaches those who need it most. In challenging economic times this will ensure that diverse needs continue to be met, and the threshold for additional support raised.
- There is a move towards monitoring wellbeing (indicated by, for example, happiness, confidence, perception of looks) as a health indicator at European and international level. Figures from the most recent Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey show Scotland's improvement in the area of wellbeing, but the survey does not include early years or cover those excluded from or not attending school.
- Portrayal of children and young people in the media, frequently in negative terms, could in itself be a useful indicator of image, perception and status in the community as a whole.
- Continuing to build awareness of children's rights should be a priority as a tangible way of improving children's lives and life chances. The view was expressed that these are not "mini-rights", i.e. a watered-down version of the rights available to adult citizens, but should enjoy equal standing, status and respect as all other rights. It was observed that the value of pursuing a rights-based approach is that, once specific rights are included in legislation, they are available for all time and for all children, strengthening the position of both children and families.
- The arts were highlighted as an area that can contribute significantly to children and young people's lives by raising aspirations and confidence; improving skills; removing social inequalities; and improving emotional health and wellbeing. However access to the arts may still be marginal and treated as a privilege rather than a right. Fragmentation of arts organisations and the lack of a clear strategy for the arts is impeding the effective use of this resource for children and their communities.
- Tackling child poverty should be a top priority, as in Europe, where 2010 has been declared the EU Year of Combating Poverty and Promoting Social Inclusion.
- The significance of relationships was stressed, between individuals, within families and across communities. Achieving better outcomes was seen to require a stronger focus on the strengthening of relationships at all levels. A Chief Constable drew attention to the role of relationships, and the impact of their breakdown on communities.
- Statistical evidence in Europe now indicates that redirecting finance from problem solving to services (including workforce development) can bring tangible improvements in outcomes within 8 years and significant improvements plus financial savings in 20 years.
- The need for continuity in policy was emphasised at the conference, in the after-dinner speech and at the Forum. The benefits of a Nordic model for funding and service provision were noted by representatives of two of the political parties: in particular, to "upbringing plans" in Norway and their role in providing a broad and overarching, straightforward vision.

Life in the fast lane: the road to better outcomes for children and young people was held in collaboration with South Lanarkshire Council and sponsored by Learning and Teaching Scotland.