

# Members' Briefing: New government promises for children, young people and their families

## Briefing Paper: Scotland's new government and its promises for children, young people and their families.

A full list of SNP commitments to supporting children, young children and their families is on Children in Scotland's website<sup>1</sup> and further clarification is available from the parliamentary debate, Taking Scotland Forward: Education and Lifelong Learning, 16 June 2011.<sup>2</sup>

This briefing highlights and comments on a selection of key SNP commitments. An additional *Briefing Paper 4: Scotland's new government and its promises for young children and their families* examines early years pledges.<sup>3</sup>

Children and families are affected by all kinds of policy, not just those directly intended to impact their lives. To create policy and legislation that ensures better outcomes for children and young people, the new government should seek meaningful, sustained consultation with children and families, and all new policy should be routinely assessed for its impact on children's lives.

### Early childhood and families

*There are pledges for legislation to oblige councils, the health service and government to deliver early years services; promises to focus on expanding early education and to focus on those from the most deprived areas; a roll out of the Family Nurse Partnership; a £50 million change fund; a parenting strategy; and encouragement for more flexible working arrangements for parents of young children.*

These issues are analysed in more detail in *Briefing Paper 4*<sup>4</sup>. Children in Scotland calls for legislation for universal entitlement to early childhood education and care funded through a means-related charging policy.

### Child poverty

*A pledge to implement the first child policy strategy, and to consider ways to support low-income families with costs associated with school.*

Children under 5 account for nearly half of all children in poverty<sup>5</sup>. This results from a long-term failure to develop adequate policies and services for families with children under school age. Children in Scotland believes that the provision of universal, affordable, accessible and integrated early childhood education and care that supports

parenting, is the most important element of any strategy aimed at reducing child poverty. Countries with such provision have lower levels of child poverty<sup>6</sup>.

Consideration of barriers to social inclusion in school because of poverty are welcome, but a universal approach would avoid creating stigma.

## School education

### Teachers and professional bodies

*Pledge to assess the recommendations of the McCormac Review and take forward the recommendations of the Donaldson Review.*

The new government should set a clear long-term aim to remove the arbitrary divide between early childhood 'education' and 'care', by making the training and employment conditions of teachers flexible enough for them to contribute fully to the early years workforce.

The Government has already invested in national debate (Working it Out<sup>7</sup>) and European research (Working For Inclusion<sup>8</sup>) on the children's sector workforce, which stress the opportunities offered by developing a Scottish pedagogy model and the benefits of investing in early childhood education and care.

There needs to be more consideration of the social dimension of education in line with the Council of the European Union's 2010 conclusions.<sup>9</sup>

### Curriculum for Excellence

*Commitments include a renewed emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and a more flexible and personal learning experience.*

Children in Scotland supports the continued roll out of Curriculum for Excellence but raises three particular concerns.

First, that the official start of the curriculum at age 3 embeds the divide between the concepts of education and care that bedevil early years services.

Second, that to support the aims the school learning environment be given attention equal to curriculum subject

matter. This would include participation in its broadest sense (including pupil councils), and elements of school building, design and organisation.

Third, that appropriate support for children with additional support for learning needs is properly in place to enable their full access of Curriculum for Excellence and social inclusion within schools.

### Primary school classes

*Continued commitment to push for smaller class sizes.*

Staff in P1 and P2 classes should be looking to the best early years practice to consider how best to support children's self-directed learning, a key part of the aims of Curriculum for Excellence. This may mean more team teaching, and more use of the outdoors through the extension of the concept of the nature kindergarten into early primary. A renewed emphasis on literacy and numeracy should mean rethinking when formal learning begins.

Research on the benefits of small class sizes is limited and inconclusive, whereas there is more evidence of the benefits of delaying formal learning until children are aged 6 or 7. Education policy for P1-P3 should not focus on the number of children in the class to the exclusion of other, better documented, factors determining positive learning experiences for young children.

### Educational support

*Pledge to ensure the implementation of the amended ASL Act 2009, and implement the Autism Strategy.*

The new Government needs to monitor more closely the true extent to which the Additional Support for Learning Act is being implemented at a time when many local authorities are cutting school support staff. While there is much of value in the Autism strategy, Children in Scotland remains cautious of separate strategies to address the particular types of additional support needs.

### School buildings

*A pledge to take forward the £1.25 billion investment in new schools*

The Scottish Government in its continued investment in school buildings should consider how good architecture and

design can help meet learning, health and wellbeing policy aims.

### School closures and rights

*Pledges include amending legislation to strengthen consultation processes in the event of proposals for school closure, with an emphasis on rural schools.*

Children in Scotland remains supportive of the Schools (Consultation) Act and the guidance we were commissioned by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People to produce on consulting with children and young people on closures should be more widely used.<sup>10</sup> Meaningful, not tick-box, consultation is needed in this often emotionally charged arena.

National and local government should look imaginatively at how schools, and rural settings in particular, can be a centre for all out of school and other community services and to consider strategic approaches that bring together different income streams to finance initial investments.

### Carers

*Among many recommendations for supporting carers is the aim for the particular circumstances of young carers to be better recognised in schools; continued support for kinship carers is promised.*

A third of young carers care for a sibling, often in addition to supporting a parent. The Additional Support for Learning Act was intended to broaden schools' understanding of those requiring varied support for learning and its full implementation would help provide young carers with the recognition they need. UK research based on data from 2001, suggests that most kinship care in Scotland goes unrecorded. Further research and awareness raising of the financial supports available would ensure Government initiatives are reaching more young carers and kinship carers.<sup>11</sup>

## Child Protection

*Pledges include promoting national competency and common practice in child protection and new guidance for children with disabilities.*

Children in Scotland urges a common understanding for those working with children based around positive support and in line with Getting it Right for Every Child rather than identification of problems on a deficit model of children and families.

While we welcome efforts to raise and standardise child protection work, this should be undertaken in conjunction with other professionals in health and in early childhood education and care, as part of a commitment to building shared understanding.

## Health and wellbeing

### Alcohol and tobacco

*Pledges include support for minimum pricing, amending legislation on adults buying alcohol for young people, and replacing the tobacco strategy.*

Children in Scotland continues to support minimum pricing legislation as one measure to tackle Scotland's unhealthy relationship with alcohol, with the caveat that it should be at a level which will significantly reduce consumption. It should also be part of wider efforts and as a whole society approach to addressing the economic and social costs of alcohol misuse to society. We urge the new Government to consider all aspects of the damage that can be caused by alcohol, and, in particular, the issue of fetal alcohol harm.<sup>12</sup>

We also remain supportive of legislation designed to reduce the access to, and attractiveness of tobacco products to young people, preventing future ill health.

### Physical and mental health

*The SNP is sympathetic to calls for a new Mental Health Bill, and plan to implement its Autism strategy. The new government plans to build on children's improved oral health and implement the strategy on obesity.*

While success in areas such as oral health is welcomed, it is important that children's health is seen in a holistic way. Nutrition, exercise, and mental health are all part of general health and wellbeing that can be best improved in combination: at home, in the community, in schools and early years settings. Enjoyment of the outdoors through models such as the nature kindergarten approach developed in Fife should be considered as a universal approach to promoting child health and wellbeing.<sup>13</sup>

This is an area where proper consultation would aid attempts to provide support. Understanding what matters to children and young people is key to helping them make different choices. However, making those choices easy by improving provision: for example, free and healthy school meals; free access to water and use of toilets in school; introduction of regular nature kindergarten and forest school-inspired activity, and free public swimming would be a start.

### Crime and justice

*Pledges include using the Proceeds of Crime Act to invest in young people, increased funding for the 'No Knives, Better Lives' campaign, and action on crimes related to prejudice, including sectarianism.*

The Government is already moving to legislate on sectarian crimes. Thought needs to be given to tackling the causes of sectarianism and other inequalities through integrated, universally available services for all children and families from birth through all stages of schooling, delivered on a basis which promotes understanding and valuing of all forms of diversity. Prevention is better than prosecution.

If you have any comments about this briefing or suggestions about professional practice or strategy, then please contact Sara Collier at scollier@childreninscotland.org.uk or on 0131 222 2412.

Published by Children in Scotland – working for children and their families (SC003527)

## References

- (1) All the SNP pledges relating to children, young people and families can be found on the policy section of our website - [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/poly\\_w\\_com.htm](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/poly_w_com.htm)
- (2) Parliament debate, 16/6/11: Taking Scotland Forward: Education and Lifelong learning, [www.childpolicyinfo.childreninscotland.org.uk/index/news-app?story=10608&category=15](http://www.childpolicyinfo.childreninscotland.org.uk/index/news-app?story=10608&category=15)
- (3 & 4) Children in Scotland (2011) *Briefing Paper 4* [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/poly\\_con.htm](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/html/poly_con.htm)
- (5) CPAG (2011) *Poverty in Scotland: towards a more equal society? Ch. 12* [www.cpag.org.uk/publications/1\\_policy.htm](http://www.cpag.org.uk/publications/1_policy.htm)
- (6 & 8) Children in Scotland (2008–2010). Working for Inclusion: the role of the early years workforce in addressing poverty and promoting social inclusion. [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/wfi)

- (7) Children in Scotland (2008–10) Working it Out [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/workforce/index.htm](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/workforce/index.htm)
- (9) Council of the European Union, (2010) *Council conclusions on the social dimension of education and training* [www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/114374.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/114374.pdf)
- (10) Children in Scotland, SCYYP (2010) *Participants not pawns: Guidance on consulting with children and young people on school closures (and other significant changes)* [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/Participantsnotpawnsguidance20100315.pdf](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/Participantsnotpawnsguidance20100315.pdf)
- (11) Buttle UK (2011) *Spotlight on Kinship Care*, [www.buttleuk.org/news.php/30/extent-of-kinship-care-revealed-for-the-first-time](http://www.buttleuk.org/news.php/30/extent-of-kinship-care-revealed-for-the-first-time)
- (12) Children in Scotland, (2011) *Briefing Paper 1: Fetal Alcohol Harm* [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/EYFbriefingsFetalAlcoholv6\\_000.pdf](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/docs/EYFbriefingsFetalAlcoholv6_000.pdf)
- (13) Mason, J. 2011, *Nature Kindergartens in Fife* [www.ltsotland.org.uk/sharingpractice/n/naturekindergartens/introduction.asp](http://www.ltsotland.org.uk/sharingpractice/n/naturekindergartens/introduction.asp)