



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

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Relevant, exciting and inspirational learning experiences starting from birth are the key to developing lifelong learning in Scotland, a special Children in Scotland conference has heard. Delegates at the conference, *Building better childhoods: understanding and developing the reform agenda*, welcomed the commitment made in a speech by Fiona Hyslop, Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Education & Lifelong Learning, that these learning experiences should start from the earliest age. Fiona Hyslop said: "If we are to make the progress we all desire to move Scotland forward, we need to provide relevant, exciting and inspirational learning experiences through schools, colleges and higher education." "We need to sustain and nurture children and young people's willingness to learn and develop — and we need to sweep away the barriers that hold young people back from continuing their education." The conference, held on 6 and 7 September at Aviemore Highland Resort, discussed different approaches to building better childhoods, improving services for children, and how to learn from international examples. Professor Christine Hallett, principal and vice chancellor of the University of Stirling, and chair of the conference, welcomed Fiona Hyslop's remarks. She said: "The conference recognised that lifelong learning is not simply a 'post-school' issue. It must begin from birth if it is to be effective and meaningful." She added: "The conference's emphasis on the importance of outcomes for children has also been striking. But there can be elusiveness in defining and measuring these outcomes. It's clear from this that we need to go further in engaging children as service users, hearing what they have to say, and acting on their views." The conference included a visit from Norwegian policy makers and practitioners to children's services in Scotland, following a recent Scottish study visit to Nordland in Norway and the launch of an associated publication, *Northern Lights: Building better childhoods in Norway*. The Norwegian delegates were given an opportunity to contrast approaches to policy and practice in their country with Scotland. Christine Hallett said: "Norway has no school inspections, no exclusions and entitlements to services from the age of one. Delegates agreed that much could be learned from Norway's approach in these areas." The conference emphasised the role of international dialogue in informing approaches to service reform. Bronwen Cohen, chief executive of Children in Scotland, said: "The conference demonstrated the richness of international perspectives on how to improve childhoods and develop better services for children. The experience of delegates meeting and exchanging ideas underlines the value of learning from continuing international discussion and dialogue." Christine Hallett concluded: "There is still work to be done in valuing, respecting and listening to children, and meeting their needs and aspirations. Part of this will be the work of the social welfare sector, but part of it will be about changing the value we place on children, and better supporting their childhoods." Main conference conclusions:

- Lifelong learning is not a 'post-school' issue. It must begin from birth.
- Discussion of outcomes for children is valuable, but defining and measuring these outcomes is sometimes elusive and difficult.
- It took Norway 30 years to reform its children's services. We do not have that long; we need to shorten the timescale and achieve our aims more quickly.
- The cultural context in which policies relating to children and young people are addressed is always important.
- The conference welcomed the commitment to simplifying funding streams for children's services. It was recognised that there is currently an absence of clear information about what is being spent on children.
- International dialogue and comparison is extremely valuable. The exploration of other administrations' policies, learning from other countries, and helping others learn is a welcome

development. The conference welcomed the support of the new Scottish government in doing this. The conference also heard about the important role played by social pedagogues in developing integrated services. A special Children in Scotland conference to be held early next year will explore the possibility of developing a Scottish pedagogy model as a means for creating a qualification which will enable people to work in residential care, play, youth and community work and alongside teachers in schools.

Notes for editors: Northern Lights

In 2006 a small group of highly experienced individuals, all involved in different ways in the planning and delivery of childhood services in Scotland, travelled North to view a snapshot of service delivery in a country that shares so much with Scotland, yet appears to have succeeded in achieving higher levels of child well-being. Northern Lights has been written as a record of this visit to Norway and to encourage many more policy makers, professionals and practitioners in Scotland to ask questions about our own approach to service delivery. It focuses on: Norway's national political landscape; local planning for children, youth and family services in Norway using "oppvekstplans" – translated into English as "upbringing plans"; Norway's consistently proactive work to advance children's rights and promote participation; the benefits of 'universal services'; maximising local resources in education; and nature as a resource in services. Northern Lights is part of the 'Building better childhoods' series – titles that highlight innovative policies and practice in Scotland, throughout Europe and beyond. As we strive to improve childhood experience, sharing ideas and practice at national and international level can inspire change for the better.

For more information about Northern Lights contact Nicola Pay: [npay@childreninscotland.org](mailto:npay@childreninscotland.org) / tel 0131 222 2448 or visit [www.childreninscotland.org.uk/publications](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk/publications)

Children in Scotland is the national agency for voluntary, statutory and professional organisations and individuals working with children and their families in Scotland. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that relevant policies, services and provisions are of the best possible quality and able to meet the needs of a diverse society.