



Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee Overview Evidence Session: Priorities and Challenges for Children's Services (In Care/At Risk)

About Children 1st

Scotland's National Children's Charity provides family support and recovery services for children and families who are at risk, or who have experienced abuse and trauma across 17 local authorities in Scotland. Alongside local services we provide national services namely: ParentLine, Safeguarding in Sport, the national Safeguarders Panel and the National Kinship Care Service. Our aims are to deliver excellent services which promote the wellbeing of vulnerable children and to be a strong public voice for the children we support.

Prioritising family support for children at risk of becoming looked after

The principle that family is the most powerful and direct influence on a child has been embedded in Scotland's policy and practice since the 1964 Kilbrandon Report. Progressive steps have been taken by the Scottish Government, local authorities and others to improve the life chances of looked after children. Yet compared to their peers looked after children continue to experience poorer outcomes across health, education and employment and remain economically poorer. Children 1st, therefore, believe that vulnerable families should be afforded support to enable their children to thrive at home, wherever it is safe to do so.

We welcome the focus within the Scottish Government's work programme on family-based preventative support and the duty placed on local authorities to provide services to parents and others in relation to children at risk of becoming looked after by Part 12 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. However, we know from our experience of supporting families within local communities that in a tight financial climate funding for early intervention and prevention is not always prioritised or guaranteed. Where services exist waiting lists are often high. Unless funding is prioritised for these types of service the core aims of prevention will simply not be met.

Involving wider family in life changing decisions

No life changing decision should be made for any child or young person without the opportunity to involve the wider family in decision-making. Children 1st is a pioneer of family decision making approaches in Scotland, including Family Group Conferencing (FGC), to support children at risk of being looked after. Our National Kinship Care Service (funded by the Scottish Government) provides support, information and advice to formal and informal kinship carers across Scotland. Kinship carers have described to us their experiences of children's services making 'without warning' requests to look after an extended family member during a moment of crisis or turmoil, Kinship carers believe FGC could have helped them to take on a more supportive role at an earlier stage.

Family Group Conferencing is a well established approach which embodies the principles of Getting it Right For Every Child (GIRFEC), children's rights and the Christie Commission approach of delivering services in partnership with families, Children 1st has been delivering FGC in Scotland for nearly 20 years. We provide FGC training for FGC practitioners, in partnership with Robert Gordon's University, and recently updated the national standards on FGC to enable best practice in Scotland to grow. While there are pockets of good practice in using FGC, for example Edinburgh, the use of FGC across Scotland has shrunk considerably because of reductions in local authority budgets. FGC should be an integral measure for local authorities seeking to meet the provisions of Part 12 of the Children and Young People Act (2014). There is therefore a need to build FGC capacity across Scotland in the best interests of vulnerable children.

Kinship Care

Kinship carers take on the vital role of bringing up and caring for children and young people whose parents are no longer able to do so, often at difficult and challenging times. With the right support kinship carers enable children to maintain a family connection and recover from loss and trauma, all of which can have a lasting positive impact on children's lives.

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 recognises the need to provide support to formal kinship carers (i.e. those who have a kinship care order or are a guardian under section 7 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995). It does not include the thousands of informal kinship carers who take on care responsibilities for children without the intervention of statutory services. Prior to the 2016 Holyrood elections Children 1st worked with kinship care families to identify the following key needs for both formal and informal kinship carers:

- Children and young people in kinship care and kinship carers have their voices heard and views taken seriously.
- There is consistency of kinship care financial support across Scotland with all kinship care families receiving sufficient financial support, regardless of their legal status.
- All kinship care families are provided with essential financial or in kind start up support at the start of the placement.
- All children and young people in kinship care have access to local support services and are supported in school to meet individual wellbeing needs.
- All kinship care families have access to holistic and individualised support services to meet their needs including: FGC, Trauma Recovery Support and Family Support.
- Local authorities have a duty to provide or signpost kinship carers to accessible and impartial information about kinship care support, legal rights and their welfare and financial options. Kinship carers, particularly those who are vulnerable, are provided with appropriate support to access these services.
- Training/resources to support Named Persons includes information about kinship care.
- Barriers are removed to enable all children and young people in kinship care to access their local leisure and community facilities.
- Local support is available to enable kinship carers in need to receive respite support.

Child Protection Improvement Programme

Children 1st warmly welcome the principles driving the Child Protection Improvement Programme and will support the Scottish Government to achieve these. For the vulnerable families we support child protection can be a bewildering experience. Being listened to, recognising strengths as well as risks and being fully involved in the process is crucial to ensure the best possible outcomes for children. We are however, concerned that the improvement programme may be too focussed on the processes within the system rather than culture and practice which, in our view, is where real improvement is required. A focus on ensuring parents and children's views and interests are fully recognised is key. We would like to see approaches which bring children's needs to the centre of professional thinking and decision making, such as Signs of Safety and FGC, incorporated into processes as a matter of course. Systems change will only be sustainable if it is accompanied by a drive to change culture and practice which puts children's best interests, rather than organisational anxiety, at the centre of professionals' thinking.

Providing family support in the early years to close the educational attainment gap

At Children 1st we work with families and children within early years and school settings to help ensure experiences of multiple disadvantage including: poverty, neglect, abuse and trauma do not determine a child's academic future. We welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to close the educational attainment gap and recognise the enormous role teachers play in children's lives as both providers of formal education and by nurturing their pupils' health and wellbeing. However, our experience of working with many of Scotland's most vulnerable families tells us that efforts to close the attainment gap must focus on the home environment, as well as the school one, if the Government's ambition is to be realised.