

Education and Culture Committee Enquiry into decision making on whether children should be taken into care

1.0 Introduction

Social Work Scotland is grateful to contribute to the Scottish Parliaments Education and Culture Committee Enquiry into the circumstances under which children are removed from their family homes. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute further to the outcomes for young people and indeed the fundamental importance of ensuring that the voices of children and young people are heard.

2.0 About Us

For the purposes of clarity, it should be noted that the Association of Directors of Social Work (ADSW) has been re-launched as Social Work Scotland to represent the leadership and professional voice of Social Work in Scotland. Clearly, this organisation is similarly eager to contribute to this debate and to ensure that above all, better outcomes are secured for the children and young people of Scotland.

2.1 Social Work Scotland would reiterate our previous submission in August 2012 that the Committee remains steered in its work by research, evidence and practice based knowledge. This should clearly influence change and not anecdote. Social Work Scotland would also reiterate and welcome the opportunity for a shared vision for helping looked after children reach their full potential and should be routed in that knowledge of how disadvantage and poverty presents itself.

2.2 With respect to the recommendations and conclusions in the report, the following is worthy of note.

3.0 Part 1 – How could decision making processes be improved?

Early intervention

Social Work Scotland remains fundamentally committed to the principles of GIRFEC and to the radical shift towards earlier intervention. Nevertheless, as recognised earlier intervention is in some instances leading to much more decisive and earlier permanency. The correlation between earlier intervention and earlier permanency is significant.

3.1 Improvement in Social Work practice in tandem with a greater focus on thresholds is inevitably leading to an upward trajectory of children in care earlier and for a longer period of their childhood. While it is clear this is the right thing to do, this is consequently placing even more financial and resource pressure on Local Authority budgets.

- 3.2 While the principles of the Christie Commission are well understood and indeed well accepted, strategically shifting resource away from acute need to earlier intervention remains immensely challenging.
- 3.3 For most Local Authorities, any shift in resource from the extreme acute end is merely consumed by need close to acute and consequently, the shift towards earlier intervention remains allusive. Moreover, data across Scotland is clearly showing that children are coming into care at a younger age and that inappropriate efforts at reunification are being reduced.
- 3.4 Social Work Scotland has engaged with Scottish Government in relation to Strategic Commissioning. This is immensely complex and challenging. Social Work Scotland remains committed to influencing the “landscape” of Children’s Services from earlier intervention, through family support and towards the acute end of care.
- 3.5 There is no lack of either commitment or motivation to shift resources towards evidence based intervention programmes and better outcomes for children. Further co-ordination and assistance is required however, in the implementation and delivery of this aspiration.
- 3.6 Social Work Scotland remains appreciative of all the efforts by stakeholders to shift resource towards prevention. In the current public sector financial constraints however, achieving radical reform will require thoughtful and sustained strategy. Social Work Scotland would welcome further discussion about how this radical shift can take place and what change approach and funding is required to meet this aspiration.

4.0 Assessments

Social Work Scotland has over the past two years seen a significant determination to make a difference around early years, early intervention and indeed permanency. Local Authorities have worked hard to tackle drift and to secure better outcomes for children. In tandem with Centre for excellence for looked after children in Scotland (CELCIS), sustained efforts have been made to improve practice and to reconcile children and young people’s care arrangements.

- 4.1 Without doubt however, what has emerged of particular concern for Social Work Scotland has been around a significant increase in legal representation, particularly around contact and also in relation to appeals. Social Work Scotland also welcomes the Children’s Hearing Improvement Partnership (CHIP) initiative and has been instrumental in developing a new contact protocol with SCRA to ensure that the rights of children and young people are balanced against those rights belonging to parents.
- 4.2 With respect to Social Work assessments, Social Work Scotland remains concerned about a persistent and sustained undermining of Social Work research, knowledge and experience. This is proving immensely challenging within the Children’s Hearing system and also within the Sheriff Court. Social

Work Scotland fully acknowledges the importance of legal representation within Children's Hearing and the importance of the protection and enhancement of parental rights. Nevertheless, across Scotland there is considerable professional disquiet that the system is still weighted heavily against the voice and the rights of the child.

- 4.3 It is evident, that exhaustive contact arrangements are frequently in place to meet the needs of the parent without due regard to the emotional impact on the child. Such contact arrangements on occasions will inevitably undermine the child/young persons capacity for future permanency. Social Work Scotland is eager to contribute and support the work of the CHIP to ensure that the whole system operates with the needs of children at its very core.

5.0 Workforce Training and Retention

Social Work Scotland clearly remains committed to workforce training and development. The professional body is currently undertaking work around workload management, particularly in relation to the impact of contact and also is involved with Caledonian University looking at the necessary induction and support of newly qualified staff. This work builds on the professions desire to recruit those candidates with the critical attributes necessary in this demanding field and also to ensure that the support and leadership is available to frontline staff.

- 5.1 Social Work Scotland continues to work collegiately with all stakeholders to ensure that year on year, we can evidence improvements and we can evidence a real difference to the lives of children and young people in Scotland. A permanence data set will be critical in strengthening, capturing and analysing performance.

6.0 Conclusion – Future Action

- 6.1 To date, 21 Local Authorities have engaged with CELCIS and direct support has been made available in addressing and enhancing Social Work skills around contact.
- 6.2 Aberdeen City and Renfrewshire Councils through the new PACE programme have been exploring innovative solutions to the challenges around delays. The intention is to implement the lessons nationally.
- 6.3 Achieving permanency and securing the very best outcomes for our most vulnerable children and young people is a complex and challenging task. It will still require innovative solutions to shift the balance of resource towards localities and towards early intervention. Achieving real progress and real change will undoubtedly require the sustained commitment and hard graft of all stakeholders. Social Work Scotland will endeavour to lead professional front line Social Work practice to ensure 'that the voices of children and young people are heard' and their needs are met and their potential unlocked.

Social Work Scotland is committed to achieving better outcomes for our children and young people and we are similarly committed not only to contributing to this debate, but to ensuring there is improvement.

7.0 Contact Details

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