

Supporting Families

A review of the implementation of Part 12: Children at risk of becoming looked after, as set out in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014

Overview

In the publication of [A Nation with Ambition: The Government's Programme for Scotland 2017-18](#) there was a commitment to 'commission a progress review on the use of family support services to prevent children going into care'. One of the aims in legislating for relevant support services for families where children are 'at risk' of becoming looked after is to provide early and effective support services to prevent children unnecessarily entering the formal care system. Part 12: Services in relation to children at risk of becoming looked after, etc. of the [Children and Young People \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#) and the [Relevant services in relation to children at risk of becoming looked after etc. \(Scotland\) Order 2016](#) came into force on 31 August 2016. Relevant services are specified as: Family group decision-making services and support services in relation to parenting.

The Scottish Government commissioned CELCCIS to undertake this national review. The objectives were to explore the progress and journeys across thirty-two local authorities in supporting families where children are at risk of becoming looked after.

Key learning points

1. Working with families using a strengths-based approach can lead to children and young people being loved, cared for and happy with the right support in place.
2. Legislation can play a strategic role in supporting service development for families; however, in isolation legislation does not lead to culture change. There was limited knowledge about Part 12: Children at risk of becoming looked after in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.
3. Poverty, parental drug and alcohol misuse, parental mental health, domestic abuse and parental learning disability are key factors that may contribute to children being taken into care in Scotland.
4. Children can be at risk of becoming looked after at all stages of childhood. The importance of relevant services for families with teenagers deserves greater attention.
5. Family group decision making (FGDM) services are flourishing in a small number of local authority areas in Scotland but require embedding into local systems to be effective across Scotland.
6. There is a lack of clarity in support for parenting as a relevant service.
7. Children's Service Plans could be further utilised strategically to develop services to support families where children may be at risk of becoming looked after.
8. Access to information about support services for families is limited despite the legislative duty to publish information about relevant services.

The review involved:

- **138 respondents** of an online survey of local authorities, health services, third sector and independent providers of support for families; responses were gathered from a wide range of professionals involved in supporting families. Social workers were the most common respondents to the questionnaire (43% of responses), followed by family support workers (12%).
- A total of **84 individuals** participated in ten focus groups conducted across Scotland. Participants included social workers, advocates, family group coordinators, family support workers, learning disability nurses and community workers. Five focus groups were conducted with statutory children and families' social work teams; one with community health practitioners; one advocacy organisation and one voluntary family support service.
- Analysis of all Children's Service Plans representing all 32 Scottish local authorities, and information published about relevant services.

Engagement: Awareness of new legislation

There was **limited knowledge about the details of the legislation relating to children at risk of becoming looked after and the associated national guidance**. Just 14% of questionnaire respondents indicated that they 'knew a lot' about Part 12 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014; while 10% indicated that they knew nothing about it. However, more than 80% of respondents indicated that they think that it is either 'important' or 'very important' to have legislation on both family group decision making and support for parenting as relevant services for families where there is a risk of children becoming looked after. A range of views were shared on the need for legislation from respondents. Generally, there was a view that legislation was helpful, especially for family group decision making services because: 'It gives a bit more weight to the service', had a human rights approach and was useful at a strategic level when in statute. There was a commonly expressed view that this legislation should be empowering and promote family involvement in decision making where children were at risk.

I think for me it's the whole legislating I'm ok with, as long as it comes with some kind of financial support as well. Because what you tend to find in social work over the years is that there is a lot of legislation passed and a lot of duties placed on a local authority but they are not always given the financial support to do so. [Focus group, statutory social worker]

Only three Children's Services Plans identified Part 12: Children at risk of becoming looked after, of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 as being relevant in local planning. All Children's Services Plans outlined commitments to early intervention and preventative practice. There was limited communication about the provision of relevant services directly to families and communities.

Exploration: Identifying Families

There was a broad consensus that **families could experience challenges from pregnancy up to young people reaching adulthood** at eighteen years old. There was concern about teenagers being at risk of becoming looked after. Often this was related to breakdown in family relationships, including for children who had been adopted. Another area of particular consideration was providing intensive services for pregnant women and their partners. Working with 'pre-birth' families was identified as a specific focus for providing family group meetings/or conferences. There was a critical reflection about the dynamics and change within families that meant that issues could arise requiring support at key transition times (e.g. new babies, children starting primary and secondary school).

There were a wide range of issues impacting on family life, most commonly identified was **poverty, parental mental health, parental drug and alcohol misuse, domestic abuse and to a slightly lesser extent, parental learning disabilities**. There was frequent emphasis that these issues were often inter-connected and not in isolation. Neglect was repeatedly highlighted as a 'huge issue' where children were at risk of becoming looked after.

There were a range of time-limited support for parenting programmes relevant for families where child or young person may become looked after. However, there was a strong emphasis on families being able to access support services at times of need and the value of an open door policy. This was very clearly demonstrated by family support workers working alongside parents with learning disabilities:

We remain involved with families, gradually decreasing support, but we will always be available for advice, encouraging them to come to parties and outings that we have. It means that we can 'sniff out' the potential for a crisis and prevent it occurring [Focus group, family support worker]

There was a recognition that working with families in this way meant that early intervention could happen in practice. This contrasted with a shared concern in some local authorities that families had to be 'in crisis' to receive a service.

Implementation: Supporting Families

Culture change

Overwhelmingly there was a view that the cultures of social work practice, and importantly how families in need were perceived, was critical in supporting families where a child was at risk of becoming looked after. **There was a strong value base shared from professionals about having 'hope' and 'belief in families that change was possible'**. Many of the services described had an aim to 'keep families together' or 'prevent children being accommodated'. There is a strong belief that families have strengths and in working together can develop a plan via a family meeting that can keep children safe and happy in families.

I had a family meeting just on Friday and afterwards the area team worker said, "If this hadn't happen this wee baby would have been accommodated" and it was the strength of the family. You're not seeing the parent in isolation, you're seeing that family operate through their family plan because the real richness is in there and how they will function and protect their children.

Relationships & skillsets

Relationships are fundamental in improving family lives for everybody involved. There was a very high value placed on spending time with families and letting them 'tell their stories'. Views shared by practitioners on what mattered to families showed: **feeling listened to, being part of the solution, understanding what needs to change, and having the right help**. Local knowledge of communities and often different families was considered to be important. On a practical level, this meant that family support workers often knew about accessible services for families and had good relationships with other advice and support providers. For some services, there was a clear emphasis on being there for families '24/7' as required. There was a particular value on having a strong relationship with families so they could ask for help in the future. This strongly correlates to an early intervention approach and recognises that families can experience periods of higher need.

Resources

There were many examples of excellent family support provision where children were at risk of becoming looked after. These approaches reflected the kind of practical help and assistance families needed to address the stress factors that had impacted on their parenting. Opportunities to teach good loving parenting practices (such, as using routines and boundaries) were highlighted. Often there was an ethos of working alongside families, 'where they are at'; one family support worker explained that with one young mum she helped her clean the flat as nobody had ever shown her how to do this. Having access to flexible, person-centred and responsive services appeared to be very important.

The challenges to supporting families most frequently cited by respondents were 'inadequate funding' and 'working with high levels of risk', with approximately two thirds of questionnaire respondents indicating that these were challenges. The 'other' category included high case-loads, lack of early-intervention services, and professionals not trusting families or feeling that 'they know best'.

There has been a recognition of the benefits of early intervention and investment in children's services, rather than focusing on risk. Many of these discussions related to escalating costs for children placed 'out with' local authorities, for example:

So there was a decision taken, because what happened was our spend for external provision was just going through the roof, but actually these kids were wanting to come back here, we were paying for their education externally, I mean the outcomes generally were just not that great, so a decision was taken by the council that we would get rid of our residential, and use our monies around that with additional funds to focus on putting support in at home. [Focus group, statutory social worker]

This was not the picture across all local authorities. However, it is worth recognising that investment into FGDM services and support for parenting in some local authority areas had a very specific reference to reducing costs for local authorities and being part of a 'culture shift' in recognising the strengths within families, rather than deficits. There was a perception shared in some focus groups that this combination of factors was leading to change in front line social work practice in some areas. There was a strong view that investment in family support was hugely advantageous for everyone. Many examples demonstrated that, with the right supports in place, children were loved, safe and happy in the care of their parents and there was not a requirement for children to be removed from parental care. It was recognised that for some families, this would be long term support as children grow and develop and this was particularly pertinent for working alongside parents with learning disabilities.

Summary

This review highlights that family support can be required for children and their parents at all stages of childhood, from conception through to adulthood. There were a wide range of issues impacting on family life, most commonly identified as poverty, parental mental health, parental drug and alcohol misuse, domestic abuse and parental learning disabilities. In some cases, support may be short term; but in many instances, family support services are open and responsive to families' needs and an 'open door' approach over time was key.

Values emerged at the heart of supporting families where identifying strengths in families and communities could be used to harness support through difficult times. This was demonstrated clearly in family decision-making services where power was shared between social work services and families.

Legislating for relevant services is one part of the jigsaw in supporting families where children are 'at risk' of becoming looked after. However, **the power of legislation is in the implementation to make a meaningful difference to the lives of families.** This review has highlighted the key drivers of culture change, relationships and skillsets, and resources, which together can start to make a difference in supporting families at times of difficulty.

To access the full report: www.celcis.org.uk/knowledgebank

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