

A brief overview of the Children's Services Reform Research study

In 2022, CELCIS was asked by the Scottish Government to carry out research with the aim of gathering evidence to inform decision making about how best to deliver children's services in Scotland, in light of the proposed introduction of the National Care Service, and its commitment to keep The Promise of the Independent Care Review (2020).

The purpose of the research study was to answer the question:

"What is needed to ensure that children, young people and families get the help they need, when they need it?"

The study had four elements, which together aimed to provide a comprehensive and holistic approach to answering this question.

Part 1: A Rapid Evidence Review,

Part 2: Case studies of transformational reform programmes,

Part 3: Mapping integration and outcomes in Scotland: A statistical analysis,

Part 4: Scotland's children's services landscape: The views and experiences of the children's services workforce.



For the Rapid Evidence Review, researchers gathered, analysed and synthesised evidence primarily from peer-reviewed research papers, national and international, to answer the following research questions:

- What models of integration exist for the delivery of children's social work services with health and/or adult social care services in high income countries? And

- What strength of evidence is there about their effectiveness in improving services, experiences and outcomes for children, young people and their families?



The second part of the work was to bring together case studies of transformational reform programmes. Here, researchers examined a range of approaches to the delivery of children's services. The aim was to improve understanding of the evidence regarding systems-level integration between children's social work and social care with health services and/or adult social care. The case studies were drawn from a range of contexts, from national approaches to highly decentralised local structures and modes of delivery. These were in five high-income countries: Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland. A sixth case study drew on learning from Scotland's experiences of national service reorganisation through the development of Police Scotland. These case studies were brought together in one report to consider the key learning and messages for Scotland.



The third part of the study mapped integration and outcomes in Scotland. Researchers investigated if the most recent major structural reform of health

and social care services to take place in Scotland – the development of Health and Social Care Partnerships - had an impact on outcomes for children, young people and families. CELCIS mapped the range of different approaches to integrated service delivery across Scotland’s 32 local authority areas and then investigated, through the statistical modelling of administrative data, any potential effects of structural integration on a range of outcomes for children and young people supported by public services. The team also took into account different factors such as geography, poverty, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, to assess the likelihood that any findings were directly about integration rather than as a result of other factors.



The final part of this study involved understanding the views and experiences of the children’s services workforce in Scotland. Through responses to an online survey, interviews and focus groups, researchers explored the opportunities, challenges, barriers and facilitators that members of the workforce identify as factors which bring about:

- high quality experiences and outcomes for children, young people and families using services;
- close multi-agency working between practitioners across different services;
- continuity of support when young people transition to adult services;
- high quality support for the workforce; and
- transformational change in services.

This part of the research also produced additional insights regarding workforce perceptions of the association between integration and outcomes for children, young people and families, and the wellbeing of the workforce.

Dr Heather Ottaway, Principal Investigator: The Children’s Services Reform Research Study

“The Children's Services Reform Research study aimed to contribute to the future design and delivery of children's services, and we did this through

developing and through the course of the study, answering the research question, what is needed to ensure that children, young people and families receive the help they need when they need it?

“And this question provided an opportunity to step back from what is quite a binary question about whether children's services should be in or out of the proposed National Care Service, and it gave us an opportunity to focus more broadly on what is needed to improve the well-being of children, young people and families who need support, and how those services should be structured and delivered in the best possible way. The study took place between September 2022 and December 2023 so it's quite a short time span, and we covered a lot of ground, and essentially, it's a multi part research study. The first two parts focused on drawing together existing national and international evidence around the integration of children's social care, health, social work services with adult services. And the second two parts, so parts three and four, focused on building the evidence base in Scotland, and we looked at that in two particular ways. One was exploring whether there is a relationship between integration and outcomes for children, young people and families. And the fourth part was workforce views and experiences on a range of things, around the delivery of local services, around their experiences of leadership, around multi-agency support, for example. So collectively, we were able to both draw on and develop a wide range of evidence. One thing that's important to note is that throughout the study, we did take very careful account of what is already known in Scotland and elsewhere about the views and experiences of children, young people and families regarding what supports them and what they need. And we did this through drawing on the available research that we had access to, but also, we drew very heavily on the views of children, young people and families that were expressed in the Independent Care Review.”

Dr Robert Porter, Lead: The Rapid Evidence Review

“For the first part of the research, we conducted a rapid evidence review, which is a systematic approach to gathering information on a focus question. We wanted to know about models of integration in high-income countries, and their effectiveness in improving services for children, young people, and families.

“This involved reviewing thousands of documents, to find the sources that were finally used to answer our questions and assessing the quality of the information that they contained.

“We found that there is not a lot of evidence about integration at a high level, with the focus being on team and service level integrations. But we did learn a lot about integration, and how it can be usefully conceptualised. We also learnt about the importance of support in enabling practitioners to work in an integrated manner, and the value children, young people, and families place on holistic services.

“We also found that the relationship between integration and outcomes is complex, with little evidence of a direct causal link. But, there was evidence that children, young people, and families value integrated services, but that the outcomes can take a long time to achieve. Further studies, covering years or even decades, are needed to build the evidence base for what works for children and families.

“This work contributed to the overall report by bringing together evidence of rationales for integration, and the process, experiences, and outcomes that are achieved. It developed our understanding of integration which was taken into the other parts of the research, as well as raising important issues for practitioners, policy makers and commissioners, as well as children, young people, and families who want to see improvements to social care in Scotland.”

While the review was undertaken to contribute to decision making around the future delivery of children’s services in Scotland, CELCIS’s researchers identified issues which are relevant to policy makers, commissioners, service managers, and practitioners outside Scotland. This information could help inform all services that work with children, young people, and their families, whether these are still being designed or whether these are well-established, specialist or universal.

Dr Alex McTier, Lead: Case Studies of Transformational Reform programmes

“For the second part of the research, we looked at international approaches to the integration of children's health and social care services. We chose five countries and deliberately chose them because they would offer strong comparators for Scotland, similar population sizes to Scotland, performed really well on international measures of child well-being, but above all, they each took different approaches to their reforms, and that was important, because we recognized straight from the outset that there was no single off the shelf model for Scotland to use and adopt.

“So, the approaches we looked at varied from centralized national approaches to their reforms, through to local, heavily decentralized approaches. And the value of looking at those different approaches, was that we could try and identify those common features that worked irrespective of what shape those reforms had taken. So that led us to clearly understand and identify that there were some functions that really operate best and work well at a national level. So setting a clear national policy, vision and direction for the workforce to follow, having clear practice guidance for different workforces to practice and deliver as consistent a service as possible, real attention to workforce planning at the national level, and also thinking about the systems that can support practitioners, in particular, thinking about the management information or data or recording systems that

practitioners would use to record information about children, young people and families.

“So those were important nationally, but actually the biggest impact for children and young people was at the local level. So thinking about what services and accessible services are available for children, young people and families in their neighbourhood or in their communities, and thinking about that service mix now, that service mix might come through local multi-agency teams working together or through a physical hub such as community space, where different services would come together to meet those holistic needs of the children, young people and families.

“The final part of our research that impacted and had learning was around the time it took for these reforms to take hold. So, all the programs we looked at had at least a 10 year timescale, and many of the programs we looked at hadn't completed their implementation to date. Because of that long timeframe, there really needs to be national, cross-party support for them, and also thinking about the expertise to deliver on such a program of change that we looked at. So, implementation is as important as the design.”

There is no one approach to the structure and delivery of children's services that can be recommended for implementation in Scotland. However, there is learning to be taken from these case studies. Not least these include:

- the consensus around the functions that require national leadership, investment and development;
- the critical importance of facilitating multi-agency working at the most local level to children and families; and
- the need to attend to the factors that support effective implementation of reforms.

Micky Anderson, Lead: Mapping Integration and Outcomes in Scotland: A Statistical Analysis

“For the third part of this research, we sought to determine if different levels of structural integration of children's health and children's social care services in Health and Social Care Partnerships across Scotland had any discernible impact on a range of outcome indicators.

“This proved to be more challenging than we originally anticipated. I think it's fair to say that there was more complexity and indeed some confusion about structural arrangements, particularly for children's health services, but ultimately, we did manage to assign Health and Social Care Partnerships to full, partial and no integration categories.

“We ended up with 25 outcome indicators but, because we were restricted to those that were available and of sufficient quality, there were some important

gaps. Using the analysis model we developed, we found significant change over time for 22 of the 25 indicators, and that factors such as deprivation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and population density were associated with some of the change that we observed. Crucially though, we found that there was no consistent evidence to suggest that level of structural integration of children's services was associated with changes to outcomes for children.

"These findings contributed to our overall report by reinforcing observations in other strands about the complexity of integration, and the importance of other components of integration beyond structural arrangements. This is not to say that structure does not matter, but structural change without attention to other components of integration appears unlikely to lead to improved outcomes for children."

This research and findings from the previous two parts of our research study, together built a picture which suggests that improving outcomes for children, young people and their families requires more than a change in organisational structures. The evidence presented across the first three parts of this study contributes to an understanding that integration is a complex and nuanced process, with many factors that can facilitate or impede achievement of the aims behind integration.

Jane Scott, Co-Lead: Scotland's Children's Services Landscape: The Views and Experiences of the Children's Services Workforce

"The fourth part of this research was to find out more about the perspectives and the experiences of Scotland's children's workforce, and it was really important to hear about their experiences of delivering and managing services, but also how children, young people and families experience those services. And when we talk about the Children's Services workforce, we included practitioners, managers and leaders from across health, education, social work, police, youth justice and early years and childcare. And it was really important that we gathered the views of those from universal from the statutory and the third sector services. That was really core and important to this research. We were able to gather the views and the perspectives through an online survey and managed to reach out to 1400 or almost 1400 survey responses, and we were able to speak directly to practitioners, managers and leaders, through focus groups and through interviews, and spoke to over 90 individuals. It was really important to explore with them their views on multi agency working, what it felt like to be working in the sector at the moment, the experiences of children and families, the transition between children's services to adult services, but also what supports they got, and how they experienced the leadership across Scotland. Through the focus groups and the interviews, we were able to explore in more detail about whether there was any particular approach to integration, different types of integration, which they felt impacted on the outcomes for

children and families. And also, just to explore that question with them, what do we need to do? What do we need to improve? To improve the outcomes for children and young people.

“It was really clear that we have a passionate and committed workforce who really care about the children and the young people and families they're working with. It was also really clear, however, just how difficult the circumstances are at the moment. We have a diverse and increasing range of needs coming through from families who need to access services. But we also have quite a complex - people described a cluttered - landscape in terms of policy and legislation and very short-term funding arrangements. And the combination of all of this meant it was quite a challenging environment, with services closing, issues around capacity and increasing workloads. There was no sense, however, or a collective view on a particular type of approach to integration which improved the outcomes for children and families, and there was no sense of the different types of integration in terms of the impact they had locally.

“It was clear, however, that good or better structures really helped to facilitate good multi agency working, and it was also really important that everybody involved in delivering services locally and on the national landscape, respect the different organizations who have something to offer. The uniqueness of this study is that we have a really good insight into what it feels to be working in children's services at the moment, but it's also given us a huge amount of data, which we can look at and reflect on with our partners and with the workforce going forward about how we can improve the delivery of health and social care to the children, the young people and the families that we work with in Scotland.”

Our researchers found a passionate, highly committed workforce that is working extremely hard to build supportive relationships with Scotland's children, young people and families to meet their needs, but that it is a workforce which faces many challenges in being able to do their best to improve outcomes for the people they work with. When combining the number of responses with the depth of insights shared, we believe this provides a robust evidence base on which to consider and assess Scotland's children's services landscape at the national level from the perspective of the workforce.



CELCIS produced a concluding report which brought together key themes and learning from across the study's findings and determined that there are a range of factors which contribute to creating the optimal conditions for implementing effective, sustainable change to improve support and outcomes for children, young people and families.

Dr Heather Ottaway:

"So, our concluding report provided an opportunity to bring together and synthesize the full breadth of the evidence and findings across the four parts of the Children's Services Reform Research study. And as part of that, it highlighted some of the strengths that are within Scotland at the moment, and I would say in particular the passion and commitment of the workforce, but also some of the real difficulties, particularly around supporting people in experiences of poverty, and some of the complexities around service structures and delivery. And from looking at those implications, we identified that there were a range of elements which contribute to developing the optimal conditions needed to enable success in improving the lives of children, young people and families who need the support of services.

"These elements aren't surprising, and they're not rocket science, but one of the key strengths of our study is bringing this national and international evidence together for the first time.

"The research study identified a range of elements that contribute to developing these optimal conditions, including:

- Supportive, trusting and consistent relationships between children, young people and families, and the practitioners who support them.
- A focus on realising rights and improving the participation of children, young people and families in decisions which affect their lives.
- Local, high quality and long-term funded service provision that is non-stigmatising and responsive to the wide range of needs of children and young people, families and communities.

- A sufficient and skilled workforce who have manageable workloads and receive the support they need from leaders at all levels.
- Some functions being led at a national level, including development and implementation of national policy and guidance, workforce planning and data infrastructure to support local service delivery.
- Structures which actively enable the workforce to provide the help and support that children, young people and families need, and to work together in partnership seamlessly across service and system boundaries.
- Effective and wide-reaching measures to combat the poverty faced by many children and families.
- A simplified and aligned legislative and policy landscape.
- An approach to planning and implementing change that acknowledges the complexity of human relations and systems, makes the best use of existing evidence but also pays attention to emerging learning.

“Working to ensure that these elements are in place will assist Scotland to continue to work towards fulfilling its aim to be the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up in.”

The Children’s Services Reform Research study aimed to contribute to the future design and delivery of children’s services in Scotland through answering the research question “What is needed to ensure that children, young people and families receive the help they need, when they need it?”

The review of existing national and international evidence highlighted the importance of relationships between children, young people, families and the practitioners who support them, and of multi-agency working at the local and/or community level.

Across all four parts of work there was evidence of consistent challenges around access to services; workforce recruitment and retention; stable funding; and in successfully translating the aims and vision of change into improving outcomes for children, young people and families.

This evidence and its implications should be carefully considered in the context of developing and delivering any change to the structure, functions and delivery of children’s services in Scotland, whether children’s services become part of or remain outside a National Care Service.

The evidence throughout this study has emphasised that whilst structures do matter in a variety of ways, what matters most is not the structure itself, but how the structure enables the workforce to provide the help and support that children, young people and families need, when they need it.

The integration of services is often thought to be a solution to the challenges of providing seamless, timely and well-managed services. But the process of

integration is complex and nuanced, with many factors that can facilitate or impede the ability to achieve the aims behind integration.

Close attention needs to be paid to the very real examples and evidence brought together in this study to use this learning to shape the way forward for improving children's services for all Scotland's children, young people and their families.

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