

Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures



Our vision

Shaping the future in Scotland and around the globe

The Institute for Inspiring Children's Futures aims to create a world where children and young people have what they need to reach their full potential, particularly children who experience adversity.

Our Vision embraces the understanding that:

- responding to adversity and creating the conditions where children flourish are global challenges. Learning together, we can implement sustainable social and economic contexts where children's rights are realised and where effective early attention provides children, young people, and their families with the support to thrive
- achieving this requires international and national policies, systems, and direct practice to be aligned, and that we work with the common objective of easing stresses on families, supporting children and young people, and reducing the necessity for formal interventions
- in welcoming and empowering the children, young people and their families who have direct experience of facing adversity, we can work together with those who are developing policies, leading systems and delivering services in order to offer insights leading to sustainable responses



Inspiring Children's Futures is a joint venture within the University of Strathclyde, between the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice (CYCJ), the Centre for Excellence for Looked after Children (CELCIS), and the wider research community, with a collective vision of ensuring that children and young people facing adversity have what they need to reach their full potential.

Our objectives

We work with the systems, services and practitioners who are working with children and young people in public care, those involved in offending behaviours, and those in need of protection. Many children, young people and their families move between systems and services at different points during a child's upbringing, and we aim to look beyond these boundaries to the common challenges that face children and young people in adversity.

Our intention is to also draw together our learning across these systems and categories of need to better understand children's earlier unmet needs, and services' potential missed opportunities.

In collaboration with others, Inspiring Children's Futures will provide opportunities to highlight and investigate the root causes of social inequality and adverse childhood

experiences, and identify what needs to be done to address them. We will focus on the preventative dimension, using our current understanding of children's circumstances to inform our thinking on how to address the determinants of adversity.

We know, from our reach across Scotland and through our international efforts, that a fresh perspective on these questions will help us to look beyond the limitations of our individual systems, nationally and internationally, to achieve more by thinking, learning and working together.

Central to this vision will be the production of high-quality research, rooted in the Centres' close connections with people who experience, deliver and lead services, to contribute to the knowledge and evidence base for work with children and young people.



About the Institute

Inspiring Children's Futures is a joint venture within the University of Strathclyde, between the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice (CYC), the Centre for Excellence for Looked after Children (CELCIS) and the wider research community, with a collective vision of ensuring that children and young people facing adversity have what they need to reach their full potential.

Each Centre is a leader in its specialist field and our expertise lies in understanding the challenges, barriers and evidence of what works, as well as leading in evidence-based methodologies of making sustainable change happen in complex systems.

Our policy and practice improvement centres have a strong track record of collaborating, networking and sharing learning with partners nationally and internationally.

Together we generate, collate, synthesise and promote the exchange of knowledge between the academic, legislator,

policy and practice communities, as well as children, young people and their families, with the aim of securing better futures for children.

Inspiring Children's Futures offers a new opportunity to apply our Centres' insights, knowledge and expertise into broader, more cross-cutting, common issues as well as the root causes in the complex landscape of children and young people's lives.

The Institute offers a new opportunity to take our learning from the experiences of the individual children and families, and consider together how these should be applied to wider, macro societal policy decisions.

Listening to and involving children, young people, and their families is crucial to our approach. Our work is as much about securing the wellbeing of adults – as the parents and carers of children – and engaging with their wider challenges, as it is about overcoming the barriers that prevent young people from flourishing.



Areas of development

Our aim is to focus on the key challenges, and the most critical drivers, that can secure our vision for children and young people. The themes we are exploring in our first year include work across disciplines, across the Institute, and around the world.

Stigma and childhood

Children and young people experience stigma for a wide range of reasons, including disability, ethnic heritage, poverty, and experience of the public care system. Stigma and discrimination can impact on children's self-esteem, health and wellbeing and long-term outcomes.

The Institute is consolidating an understanding of children's and young people's experiences of stigma across a range of causes, in order to apply this learning to improve service delivery and beyond.

This knowledge exchange programme brings together international learning from experience, theory, research, policy and practice, to promote change for children and young people living with stigma and marginalisation.

Economic and financial challenges in addressing children in adversity

A family's economic context is critically relevant to their fundamental wellbeing and especially their levels of stress, which in turn can impact directly on children's development. While the relationship between these is complex, the financial drivers that affect children and families are an important focus for the Institute: our aim is for a society in which children can thrive.

Drawing from economic policies around the world, we will explore, for example, how Scotland's new welfare powers might best promote more stable positive family environments for children, and how spending at all levels of government can deliver greater capacity in more effective ways to resource the services needed to implement policies effectively for children and families.

Our work will reinforce the message of the great value of promoting children's wellbeing and opportunities to support children's meaningful engagement in, and contribution to society.

With our colleagues at the University's Fraser of Allander Institute, Scotland's leading centre for applied economic analysis, we are developing a joint project, with a particular focus on identifying the critical policy choices for decision-makers today that will contribute most effectively to the outcomes for children facing adversity.

We aim to work with policy-makers and funding bodies to consider how this learning can best be applied to benefit children and families. For example, we are enthusiastic about the interest in local authorities' decisions to waive council tax to care leavers, which has become an increasingly successful collective effort with partners.

Improving young people's educational outcomes

Every young person has a right to education and completing their education can be a critical link to achieving their aspirations in adulthood.

The 'Young People's Inclusion Project' is built on the links we know exist already between staying in school and a young person getting to where they want to go, for example a workplace, apprenticeship, college, or university.

We are closely investigating the ways in which schools can support students to stay in school (school inclusion) and in what ways 'school inclusion' influences post-school destinations of young people involved in the care system.



Importantly, through this active, change-promoting project we are identifying the barriers to inclusion that exist at both systems and practice levels, in order to produce – and then, implement – good practice guidelines for schools to better support students’ inclusion.

Thanks to the generous philanthropic support of University alumni, the CELCIS Education team is working with schools and others across the Institute, to develop and deliver this change project.

Technology and children

Technology is an integral backdrop to children and young people’s lives. Our understanding of the potential benefits, and the significant potential concerns and impact of technology in their lives, as well as our promotion of their digital rights, are fundamental to supporting the delivery of effective children’s services.

The Institute will look at how the immense opportunity that technology provides can most benefit children in adversity, and how services can play a crucial preventive role for these children.

As a key starting point, the Institute is keen to explore the misuse of technology, in particular the prevention and curbing of online sexual exploitation, to better equip and support families, professionals and carers working with children in this rapidly changing context.

International activities

The Institute bases its work on a clear understanding of the global nature of the challenges of securing child welfare and wellbeing, and places partnerships at its heart. We are driven by a commitment to promote the rights of children, and are guided by the principles within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. These recognise the essential role of preventing children’s unnecessary separation from families and good quality family-based, and family-like, alternative care for children out of their parents’ care, within a range of alternative care settings.

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Our international team, primarily based at CELCIS, is a key collaborator in the international implementation of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children around the world, promoting the application of these ‘necessity’ and ‘suitability’ principles in policy and into practice. In the context of rapid de-institutionalisation across the world, for example, we aim to inform how foster care is designed

and implemented, through new research and knowledge exchange activities.

Like our Scotland-based work, our close partnership with UNICEF, the EU and international NGOs aims its delivery at a national level, for policy-makers and practitioners, as we develop implementation tools for evidence-based care reform and undertake an unprecedented scale of research on children in alternative care.

We seek and share learning internationally with our youth justice stakeholders to develop and support collaborations.

World-leading research of academics and researchers at the University of Strathclyde, and involvement in international networks are key partners in our international learning activities.

We are developing a stronger role in key international organisations and increasing our contribution to and influencing global thinking. Our increased learning and understanding from international experience is being brought directly into the thinking of the Institute and its constituent parts to enhance our work throughout Scotland.

This record of achievement offers a strong basis for our growing work and we are keen to continue to learn together.



Our Centre partners

Our Centres have a commitment to improving the experiences and outcomes of children and young people who face difficult circumstances, for example, children in need of protection, those involved in offending behaviours and, children in public care ('looked after'). Our Centres work closely with many, diverse partners, directing activities at strategic, operation and practice levels, across multiple disciplines, and applying a range of evidence-informed approaches to our work to support changes in policy as well as practice.

Looked after children

Many families have experiences that result in the need for their children to need extra care, support or protection from public agencies. In some cases, children and young people become 'looked after' which means that a local authority takes on some legal responsibility for the care and wellbeing of the child. In Scotland, this 'gate-keeping' process most often happens through the country's unique children's hearings system. The law courts also have relevant powers, or the arrangement can be made on a voluntary basis between the child's family and their local authority.

We know that while there is excellent work being done to support children and young people in and on the 'edge' of care, we still have far to go to. The role of primary and secondary prevention services in providing effective support to families before they reach crisis point needs to be strengthened. The delivery of a suitable range of care placement options which provide stable, supportive and positive relationship-oriented care to 'looked after' children and young people on a day-to-day basis is difficult, and well worth the investment. With improvements in supports to kinship, foster and small-scale residential care, and wider services, children and young people will experience the support and care they need to thrive.

One of our primary goals within the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children (CELCIS) is to encourage the development of a care system that ensures sustainable, long-term placements for children, speedily and effectively. We apply an innovative whole-systems approach to improving permanence and stability in the lives of looked after children, working with all agencies involved in the welfare of these children.

Education is also critical in this modern, digital world. Official statistics show that looked after children, particularly children who are looked after at home, have much lower school attainment on average than all children in Scotland. A very high proportion of looked after children leave school at the earliest possible opportunity, with few qualifications and limited access to the kinds of positive destinations enjoyed by many other school leavers. We work with others to see the narrowing of the education attainment gap for all looked after children.

Although children and young people have many of the same health issues as their peers, the extent of these is often greater because of their past experiences. Many looked after children have had their physical health neglected, have poor mental health and will have experienced significant trauma. We work alongside health and mental health services to support their redesign for better support to these children and young people.

Care leavers often struggle on their journey into adulthood. For many, the leap from care to independence is just too great, and young people continue to experience problems that lead to much poorer outcomes than their peers. Young people usually leave care much earlier than their peers and it often happens abruptly and with little support. Our work aims to increase understanding that leaving care is a life event for looked after young people, and that services and systems need to be designed and implemented to reflect this important milestone.



Scotland's independent review of care, commissioned by the First Minister, will identify and deliver lasting change in the care system and leave a legacy that will transform the life chances and wellbeing of children and young people in care, with the voices of care-experienced children and families and care leavers – young and old – at its heart. Their experience will guide the review, helping to bring clarity and focus to what matters most within the review's complex and challenging task. Our hosting at CELCIS of the secretariat for the care review supports different approaches to participation of children and young people, and analytical insights to draw key lessons nationally – many of which already resonate with care leavers' experiences internationally.

Child protection

Our work at CELCIS supports existing local and national services for the protection of children, with the aim of better protecting children at risk from harm and delivering better outcomes for them and their families. We work with those supporting families to identify potential risks at the earliest possible point, at a stage which may prevent escalation of that risk, and better protect children from experiencing further harm, abuse or neglect. Alongside our partners, we help them to deliver the right kind of support, at the right time, for each individual and family.

Based on evidence of the long-term impact of chronic child neglect, we focus on strengthening the help available to children and families who are vulnerable or known to services while taking account of barriers to early intervention and the full realisation of a 'getting it right for every child' policy. In response to reviews of child neglect, we align our work with an emphasis on prevention and early intervention as this provides most effective outcomes. Working alongside a wide range of partners, we build on existing good work while also addressing gaps and inconsistencies in practice.

Children in conflict with the law

Low-level offending is a common feature of childhood, as children grow and test boundaries. However, those who become involved in child and youth justice systems are almost always our most vulnerable and traumatised children.

By responding to children involved in offending through a justice lens, the trauma and adversity they have experienced can be compounded with an additional layer of stigma and blame associated with their offending behaviour, a label which, once given, is difficult to escape.

Across Europe, we have seen a significant decline in the numbers of children involved in offending behaviour and being brought into contact with the formal youth and criminal justice systems. However, the children who do come into contact with the system continue to experience particularly negative life chances and have the most complex needs and issues.

There is a difficult balance to be struck between identifying and managing risk where children pose a serious risk of harm to others, intervening in early to low-level offending in ways that do not involve stigma or negative labelling, and ensuring we address the underlying causes of offending behaviour, not just the offending itself.

Our work in the Centre for Youth & Criminal Justice (CYCJ) supports improvements in youth and criminal justice, working towards a Scotland where all individuals and communities are safe and flourish. Improvements across youth and criminal justice are promoted by providing a range of practical supports, including advice for professionals about individual young people and service redesign, guidance and resources for practitioners, training and development opportunities, producing and synthesising research to inform practice and policy, and supporting knowledge sharing across practice, policy, research and lived experience.

Our 'Interventions for Vulnerable Youth' service provides best practice forensic mental health risk assessment and management for children who pose the most serious risk of harm to other people. CYCJ colleagues work closely with everyone involved in the lives of children at risk of, or involved in, offending, to identify how policy and practice can be improved and how best we can work collectively towards the changes required.



Our research and evidence programme

The Institute is facilitating close collaboration between the Centres, and the academic partners at the University and beyond, and with partner academics from across all fields – including with Strathclyde’s international strategic partners – who have a meaningful interest in the lives of children. Promoting the exchange of knowledge and experience between the academic, policy and practice communities, and children, young people and families, we aim to secure a better future for children.



We are building on existing research collaborations across Scotland, the UK, and internationally, and generating new relationships, in order to:

- develop collaborative research projects and international collaborations
- identify key research priorities for the Institute drawing on the Institute’s vision, the work of the Centres, existing research, gaps in knowledge and evidence, and key areas of policy and practice
- reinforce existing strengths in multidisciplinary and cross-university research work
- improve research performance, outputs and impact
- create opportunities for doctoral students, aligning disciplines and activities across the University related to children

We will be a core contributor to the University’s Strategic Research Theme of Society and Policy, promoting and engaging University-wide on one of its key elements, the challenges facing children and young people.

Our external partners

The success of our work to date has rested on the excellent support from our many partners and co-designers, including those with whom we develop and co-produce the ideas that drive our national and international activities.

We recognise, in particular, our close partners in their funding and support of our thinking and development:

- Convention of Scottish Local Authorities
- European Commission
- International NGOs (TdH, SOS Children’s Villages, LUMOS, Save the Children, Better Care Network)
- the generosity of University of Strathclyde alumni donors
- National Health Service
- Robertson Trust
- Scottish Government
- UK Government
- UNICEF

We acknowledge, especially, the support of those with whom we work alongside – children, young people and their families and carers, practitioners, professionals, service managers, systems leaders and policy-makers – to apply those ideas into day-to-day reality for children and young people.

We look forward to working in close partnership with you and others, as we continue to make a contribution to securing the rights of children. Our work depends on securing sustainable funding streams over the medium term, and partnering with those with a close interest in our work.

If you would like to be a partner of our work, please keep in contact: iicf-enquiries@strath.ac.uk







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Centre for excellence
for looked after children in Scotland

