

Children in Scotland magazine

Attention please!

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challenge on children's rights
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Children in Scotland
Level 1, Rosebery House
9 Haymarket Terrace
Edinburgh, EH12 5EZ
Telephone: 0131 313 2322
info@childreninscotland.org.uk
childreninscotland.org.uk

Editorial

Editor: Jennifer Drummond
Editorial staff:
Chris Small, Lynn Gilmour,
Nicola Pay (Membership)

Magazine Brand
Development: Chris Small,
Jennifer Drummond

Design

Template: Alan Tait
Additional Design:
Aimée Colley
Brand: Michael O'Shea

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Advertising

Tracy Hope
T: 0131 313 8839
E: thope@childreninscotland.org.uk

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Chief Executive: Jackie Brock

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To contribute to *Children in Scotland Magazine* contact Jennifer Drummond, Editor:
T: 0131 313 8823/
E: jdrummond@childreninscotland.org.uk

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E: membership@childreninscotland.org.uk
W: childreninscotland.org.uk/join

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Welcome...



Jennifer Drummond
[@jen_drum](https://twitter.com/jen_drum)
#CiSMagazine

...to a new magazine and a new era for Children in Scotland.

We've been hard at work over the summer redesigning the magazine, to complement a new look and tone of voice for the organisation. Here is the result.

The magazine now comes presented in three distinct sections.

In Features, you will find the latest research and campaigns from the sector as well as a lead interview with a key decision-maker from the sector. I am thrilled to kick off our launch edition with one of the first full-length interviews with Scotland's Children's Commissioner, Bruce Adamson, who is as pleasant as he is formidable!

We have also introduced new Comment pages which reflect a heavier focus on analysis and opinion. They offer viewpoints on current practice and policymaking, and feature guest opinions alongside a regular column from our Chief

Executive, Jackie Brock, and other members of our staff team.

Finally, in recognition of the value and importance of sharing experience and expertise, we have introduced a new section, Voices. These pages highlight the voices of children and young people themselves, celebrate the work of our members and introduce us to new projects making their mark in the sector.

As Editor, it's my goal to ensure that the magazine continues to be essential reading for the sector, and is packed full of interesting, educational and thought-provoking articles that strengthen understanding of how we can improve children's lives. But it is also my hope that our new approach encourages you to engage with us, and share your views, in person or online. I would love to hear what you think about the changes to the magazine and the perspectives being shared. Do get in touch via jdrummond@childreninscotland.org.uk

I hope you enjoy reading this as much as we enjoyed making it!

Drummond

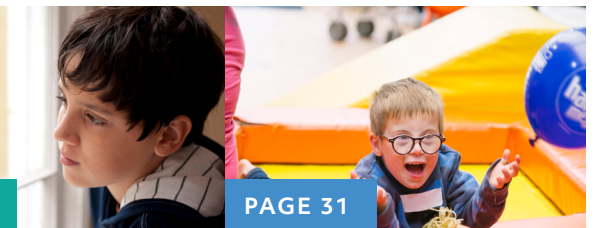
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Bruce Adamson, Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland
Photograph © Anna Cervinkova

A force for change

Our new Children's Commissioner is pushing for major shifts in legislation covering equal protection, the age of criminal responsibility and UNCRC incorporation. How will the Scottish Government respond? *By Jennifer Drummond*

Very few people would claim to have their dream job, but Bruce Adamson, Children and Young People Commissioner for Scotland, says exactly that. Taking office earlier this year, the human rights lawyer is, in his own words, doing "the best job in Scotland".

The New Zealand native has an impressive CV. Working as the legal advisor to Scotland's first Children's Commissioner, Kathleen Marshall, in 2005, he went on to hold key positions with the Scottish Human Rights Commission, the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union. He was the UN representative responsible for coordinating the work of human rights commissions around the world. He has guided emerging democracies in Eastern Europe on their human rights agenda, and has worked with war-torn countries to ensure obligations to uphold basic children's rights are being met. Closer to home, he chaired the Child Law Centre, and spent 13 years as a member of the children's panel.

These varied experiences all have one thing in common – being an advocate for those who often don't have a voice – and culminated in Bruce starting work as the new Commissioner in May. In terms of children's rights, it is one of the most significant roles in Scotland, with the power to hold Scottish lawmakers to account. This gives the office a vast remit and Bruce and his team are still in the process of identifying both short and long-term priorities. But he already has strong opinions on where he can make immediate improvements.

"My biggest priority at the moment is making sure the government and parliament, and others, properly listen to children and young people. I don't think they do that very well at the moment," he says.

He is also a strong advocate of the human rights of parents, and wants to highlight the role parents play in advocating for the rights of their children. These shouldn't be seen in opposition, he believes. "A lot of the time when we talk about children's rights, we talk about it in conflict with parent's rights, and I want to change that. A lot of what we talk about in terms of children's rights is access to education, to healthcare, to places to play, and to be kept safe. Parents agree with all of that, and are usually the biggest champions."

Changing hearts, minds – and the law

But it's not just about changing rhetoric. The Commissioner is clear about his intention to reform Scottish law to better reflect and support the rights of children and young people. There are three key areas he feels particularly passionate about: incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), equal protection, and the age of criminal responsibility.

Children's rights are slowly making their way up the political agenda. Not only has the Scottish Government actively sought children's and young people's views on mental health and education reform, but members of the Scottish Cabinet also invited a group of children and young people to Bute House in March this year. The meeting, which the government says will now take place annually, offered a chance for the young people to express, in their own words, issues relevant to their lives today. Together, they agreed action around teacher education, children and young people's rights, mental health and Scotland's relationship with Europe.

The Commissioner believes this indicates some real progress. However, he warns that despite vocally and publicly displaying support for the advancement of children and young people's rights, in his overall view the government is still falling short.

"There are Scottish ministers whose hearts are in the rights place, who really do want to do the right thing, but they are failing in terms of turning that into practice," he says.

"Things like not incorporating the rights of the child. They have voted down amendments from opposition parties that would lead to it, while at the same time saying they want to. That's a really stark example of making public statements but then actively fighting against the action to do it."

Numerous organisations across the country have called for the government to incorporate the UNCRC, enshrining in Scots law a number of fundamental civil, social, political, economic and cultural rights for every child. It is continually referred to in the UK's Periodic Review (the most recent of which was published

“Don’t be forced to act like mini-adults to fit in. Demand your right to be considered as children. Demand all your rights”

by the United Nations in September 2017) as an area in which we could do better.

The Commissioner dismisses opposition to incorporation on the grounds of accountability and practical application. “I don’t see any barriers whatsoever to incorporation,” he says. “The constitutional set-up in Scotland can be confusing, but that doesn’t stop Scotland incorporating the UNCRC for devolved purposes. There’s no barrier to doing that now.”

But what would this mean in practice? He warns that incorporation of the UNCRC shouldn’t be seen as a silver bullet to addressing inequality issues within Scottish society. Instead, it is about realising children’s rights in a progressive way. Incorporation is the gold standard we have committed to.

“It doesn’t mean that everyone gets the exact education or healthcare they want. It doesn’t mean that waiting lists suddenly disappear or that we magic up additional schools, teachers or social workers,” he explains. “What it requires the state to do is demonstrate that it is spending money appropriately in a way that takes children’s rights into account. It makes people more accountable.”

The Commissioner cites other countries, such as Belgium and Norway, as examples of where incorporating the UNCRC has changed decision-making, public perception and the way we think about children’s rights. International evidence suggests better outcomes and more efficient spending in terms of early intervention as a consequence of full incorporation.

“The advantages are huge, not just for children and young people, but for all of us. By incorporating the UNCRC it actually makes things work better, leading to a better society and better communities.”

No regrets

It is not just on UNCRC incorporation where the Commissioner sees Scotland lagging behind our international counterparts. The issue of equal

protection has consistently been raised in the UN’s Treaty Bodies and its Universal Periodic Review of Scotland. Previous changes to the law on protection have only come about as a result of legal challenges taken to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. In essence, change has happened because the Government has been forced into it, not as a result of proactive measures taken in recognition of children’s rights.

On leaving office, previous Commissioner Tam Baillie said the failure to secure legislative change around equal protection from assault was one of his biggest regrets. Mr Adamson intends to take a much harder line.

“It is my view that the Scottish Government is in breach of its international obligations,” he says, with the confidence of someone who knows he has the legal knowledge and clout to successfully argue his point. “The UN, Council of Europe and EU have all repeatedly condemned the UK’s position and Scotland’s position. This is something that needs to change now.”

Since taking office the new Commissioner has been proactive about ensuring this is high on the agenda of lawmakers: they know he won’t allow them to be passive on such an important issue. He has already met with Scottish ministers and Scottish Government lawyers to set out his legal arguments, and has appealed for the support of the legal community by setting out his position in a recent article for the journal of the Law Society of Scotland.

“This is a breach of international law and the government’s position is in breach of international law,” he says. He believes the Scottish Government could find themselves on the wrong side of a legal challenge.

“The idea that the assault of a child for the purpose of physical punishment could in any way be justified as necessary for any democratic society is nonsensical. The idea that violence should be used to change behaviour goes against the basic principles of human dignity.

The idea that just because the assault against a child is classed as less serious assault and allows it to be justified, just isn’t tenable. The government has to change the law right now.” For anyone who might doubt his determination and conviction on this point, he adds: “My position won’t be one of regret. My position is – this needs to change or legal action will be taken.”

Initially adopting a ‘wait and see’ approach to Scottish Green MSP John Finnie’s proposals for a Member’s Bill on the issue, the Scottish Government has since confirmed they will not oppose such a Bill in Parliament.

Age of responsibility

Scotland has one of the lowest ages of criminal responsibility in the world: at eight it is four years lower than the UN’s absolute minimum of 12. Set almost a decade ago, this was acknowledged as the starting point for moving upwards. We, as a nation, have frequently been criticised about the current legislative status quo. It is a position the Commissioner himself calls “incomprehensible”, recalling that although the Scottish Government has committed to shift the age threshold from eight to 12, and recently announced plans for a Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility Bill, this is still considered by the United Nations to be too low.

The Commissioner also points out a glaring disparity between the ages at which young people are expected to take responsibility for their actions and when they are given the opportunity to participate in democracy. Children as young as eight are expected to understand the complexities of the legal system, yet young people are not considered responsible enough to vote until the age of 18, or 16 in Scottish elections.

“So at age eight, we think in Scotland that children have enough understanding of their actions and the consequences of their actions that we

should criminalise them. But then we say it is not until they are 18 that someone can have the ability to choose someone to represent them in Parliament. I think that is absolutely ridiculous.”

“To be able to understand that my action is in breach of a law that has been set and that there are legal consequences to me breaking this rule, as opposed to any other rule, is actually quite a complicated thing to understand. I don’t think there are any eight year olds that understand the criminal law in that way.

“Choosing someone that you agree with and believe represents you is, in my mind, a much

simpler thing to understand. I think you can do that at a very young age. You can identify if you agree, or don’t agree, with what someone is saying. So, when you contrast voting age and criminal responsibility that’s really stark.”

In combination, resistance to incorporation of the UNCRC, the failure – at the time of going to press – to enshrine in law equal protection from assault for children, and an internationally condemned position on the age of criminal responsibility might paint a depressing picture of children’s rights in Scotland in 2017. But the Commissioner disagrees, maintaining “we should always be optimistic.” And, he has a plan.

In June he announced his support for a national action plan on children’s rights. The intention would be to build on the body of international evidence, routinely gathered and reported since the 1993 Vienna world conference on human rights, which calls on all countries to identify how they are delivering on rights-related promises. Conclusions drawn from the results over the years have identified the need to involve civil society and children and young people. But, crucially, the consensus is that for any plan to be effective it must have an emphasis on delivering, not rhetoric, and be owned and actively driven forward by the

On equal protection:

“The idea that the assault of a child for the purpose of physical punishment could in any way be justified as necessary for any democratic society is nonsensical”

government. Bruce believes this approach will be the key to the success of such a plan in Scotland.

"It has to be focused on it being a *government* action plan, a government *delivery* plan, on how they are going to demonstrate their commitment to children's rights by setting out how they are going to deliver on those promises," he explains. He criticises the reporting duties introduced with the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 as being "really not good enough", suggesting an action plan, specifically concerned with the rights of children and young people, would immediately bring the type of accountability a simple duty does not. He is also clear that such a plan doesn't mean delivering right away but outlining how the goals will be achieved, including what financial investment is needed, what resources are required, and who will be responsible.

"It needs to be action-focused with very clear time frames, and a very clear process for monitoring and evaluation. It needs budget assigned to it. It needs to have responsibility attached at the highest levels of government and civil service. It needs to be fully embraced across government, with high level buy-in and commitment. It needs to link to the government's work and flow through all areas of government.

"It can't be something that's seen as a wish list. It needs to be the government's plan to deliver on promises it has already made. This isn't new promises, this isn't new ideas, but promises that were made through the international law, assessments that have been made from the monitoring and reporting process and treaties that tell us what to do. The government's response needs to set out very clearly what they are going to do to deliver on that."

With the Scottish and UK government duty-bound to report on rights-based activity at regular intervals, an action plan, he suggests, is simply "a smarter way of doing things".

Over to you

Although Mr Adamson is focused on these immediate priorities, the longer-term agenda of the office will be put in the hands of children and young people. Katie, aged 15, and Nina, 13, have also attended the interview with me. As members of the Children's and Young People's Advisory Group recently established by Children in Scotland, they and their peers identified mental health and gender inequality as two particularly pressing topics. They ask the Commissioner how he plans to address these.

"There are lots of really important issues – poverty, mental health, care experience, disability or other things – and I need to make those choices, but I am not going to make those choices until I've spoken to a lot of children and young people about what they think I should be doing," he says.

The Commissioner draws attention to the consultation work the office is undertaking, with the staff team currently developing a plan which aims to gather views from children and young people across Scotland. This body of work will build on participation and engagement activity already completed while seeking the fresh input of children and young people from the Highlands to the Borders.



The Commissioner on ... Brexit

"It is important to remember that the rights structures that we talk about aren't from the EU. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a UN document, the European Convention on Human Rights is a European Council document. We are still going to be part of that – they won't be affected."

"In order for Scotland to properly live up to its commitment to children and young people, it's not about the EU, it's about the decisions that are made here to embed children's rights into our decision making and our service delivery. That's done through incorporation of the UNCRC, and a national action plan on children's rights. Those things are more important, in terms of going forward, than Brexit is to me."

"The EU is powerful in requiring things from those who want to deal with them, and that hasn't been discussed much. It can be a powerful motivator for change. One of the things I want to look at is how the EU can be a strong ally for us in terms of holding the government to account. We spend a lot of our time thinking about what our side of the negotiations should be whereas actually what we need to be thinking about is talking to our European partners about what they should be requiring from our government."

"One of the things I am absolutely committed to is getting children and young people right into the heart of my work – how I set the budget, how I run my office, how I use my time," he explains. "I want children and young people to really help me make some of those difficult decisions about how I prioritise things."

Speaking of difficult decisions, Nina and Katie challenge the Commissioner on what he thinks is the most important right for children and young people.

"There's no most important right. A key thing to realise about rights is that they are interdependent and interrelated," he says, offering up an example. "The right to food and social security affect your right to education – if you've not got a full tummy, and you are living in a damp house and you've not really got somewhere to sleep, that's going to impact on your right to education. In terms of all rights relying on other rights, the key value in terms of looking at human rights is looking at them interconnected. You can't look at one right without thinking how it is going to affect the other ones."

Before we part ways, we ask if the Commissioner has any advice for the young people in attendance.

"Don't be forced to act like mini adults in order to fit in," he says. "Demand your right to be considered as children, demand all of your rights. Engage with learning about your rights so that you see their value and really use them to their full extent."

But in order to do this, he warns, the adult world needs to change. Adults must ensure we know and respect the rights of children and young people in our lives. We need the systems, structures and processes to understand and reflect everyone's voices – not just the voices of the adult population. Decision makers need to respect the rights of all and legal systems and structures need to protect our children. Elected officials need to address the democratic deficit, remembering that they are representing all of those in their constituency, not just those who are old enough to vote. We, as adults, need to ensure children know their rights and utilise them to their full potential.

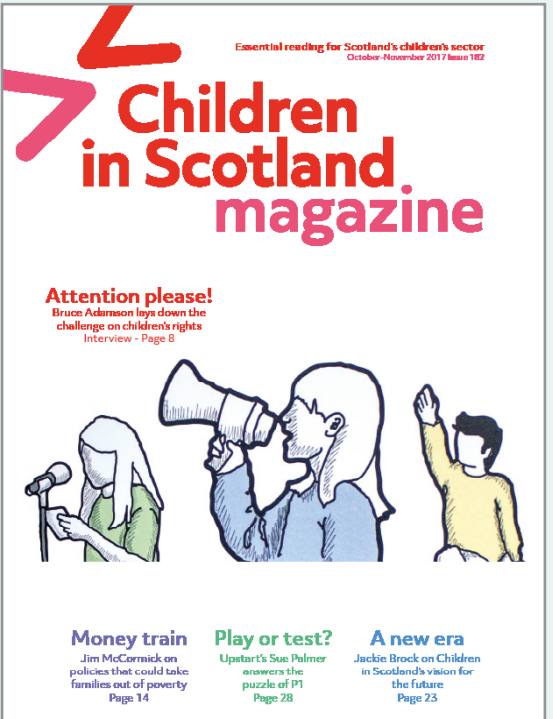
Bruce Adamson is a man with strong opinions and beliefs. He is persuasive. He oozes drive and determination, and a compassion that comes with dedicating his whole working life to the advancement of human rights. He is also a man who practices what he preaches. When he tells you he has the best job in Scotland, you'll believe him.

Interview by Jennifer Drummond, with Nina (13) and Katie (15) from our Children's and Young People's Advisory Group.

> **Photography** © Anna Cervinkova
www.annacervinkova.com

> **With thanks to Bruce Adamson and the Office of the Commissioner**

> **For more details on the recently announced Programme for Government, which includes items on equal protection and the minimum age of criminal responsibility, see [News, page 6](#)**



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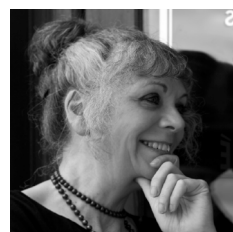
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Solving the P1 puzzle



@UpstartScot

Teachers are being asked to reconcile two competing ideologies: building a play-based curriculum or teaching to test. Children are paying the penalty, argues Sue Palmer

A decade ago, the then Scottish Executive published a document that had the potential to change the life-chances of innumerable Scottish children. *Building the Curriculum 2 (official guidance for the Early Level of Curriculum for Excellence)* (BtC2) outlined an approach to care and education for three- to six-year-olds very similar to the type of play-based 'kindergarten stage' seen in Nordic countries.

Sadly, it didn't catch on.

One reason is the word 'play'. The play-based principles of kindergarten education, based on the work of Friedrich Froebel and other great early years pioneers, have never been widely understood in the handful of countries worldwide where children start school at the very young age of four or five. So, while it's taken for granted across the rest of Northern Europe that under-sevens learn best through play, most UK adults see playing as a frivolous activity, only appropriate during out-of-school hours.

Another reason, again the result of our early school starting age, is that Curriculum for Excellence's (CfE) Early Level is split down the middle, making a clear distinction between nursery level and primary one.

From government level down, these two chunks have very different structures, systems and bosses. So the Scottish public, and its politicians, think of the first half (nursery) as 'childcare' and the second (primary one) as 'education'. The 'childcare' chunk – despite

its increasingly professional workforce – is unfortunately valued mainly in terms of the hours it frees up parents to work. Education has far greater prestige but is hierarchically organised, and is right at the bottom of an academic pecking order. Since most early years educational expertise these days resides in the pre-school sector, it doesn't exert much influence in schools.

So, despite ten years of CfE's Early Level, most Scots still think that 'play' has little or no educational value and traditional schooling, with an emphasis on reading, writing and reckoning, should start at

"Most UK adults see playing as a frivolous activity, only appropriate during out-of-school hours"

five. Unsurprisingly, therefore, very few P1 classes have so far fully embraced the play-based pedagogical principles of BtC2 and, thanks to regular media reports about 'falling standards', many private nurseries dilute play-based learning with 'school readiness activities'.

There is, however, some good news.

There is a growing awareness among professionals in all areas of children's services that Scotland's difficulties in closing the attainment gap, along with a range of physical and mental health problems among children and young people, are linked to adverse childhood experiences, especially in the early years. They are also linked to significant lifestyle changes over recent decades, including the decline of outdoor, active, social, self-directed play.

Today's children tend to lead a mainly indoor,

sedentary existence from the day that they're born.

Yet neuroscience now confirms what early years experts have always said. The under-sevens need plenty of 'old-fashioned' play to promote lifelong physical and mental health. They also need sensitive, non-judgemental adult support to develop self-regulation skills and emotional resilience. What's more, international evidence clearly shows that in terms of closing the attainment gap, a 'kindergarten approach' is more effective than an early focus on age-specific academic standards.

As these revelations have spread, more and more teachers are now keen to implement a play-based approach throughout the Early Level. This summer a Facebook group on 'P1 play-based pedagogy', launched by Upstart Scotland, attracted 300 members within 24 hours. Unfortunately, their enthusiasm has coincided with a political response to the attainment gap that's still rooted in outdated cultural assumptions: national assessments in literacy and numeracy, linked to skills-based 'benchmarks' for achievement and starting at P1, will begin this year.

Many five-year-old children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have little chance of reaching these benchmarks without considerable coaching in the relevant skills. So Scotland's P1 teachers find themselves in a dilemma. Should they support four- and five-year-olds in developmentally-appropriate, play-based learning, as in BtC2, and as international evidence suggests is the most beneficial? Or should they

perform in literacy and numeracy tasks which, for well-established developmental reasons, other European children don't encounter until they are six or seven?

During the summer Upstart heard many reports of situations where senior managers in schools and/or policymakers in local authorities require pupils to reach the 'expected standard'. In these cases, primary teachers are under considerable pressure to teach to the tests. As Chair of the campaign for play-based learning, I met with representatives of Education Scotland to ask advice about the P1 dilemma.

I was delighted to hear that they 'hold dear the sorts of practice we know work well, and that are appropriate for children's individual needs and the importance of children learning through play, as set out in BtC2'.

It was encouraging that, in terms of inspection, 'the effectiveness of P1 teachers

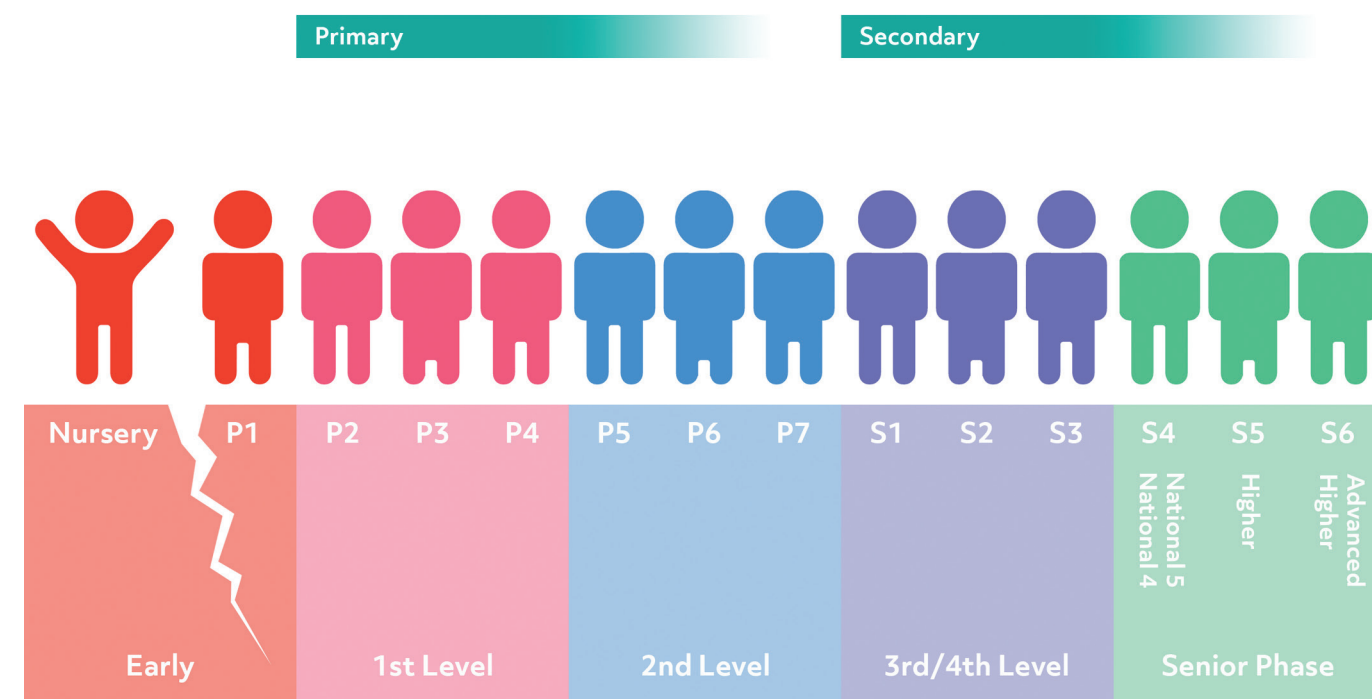
will not be judged on the basis of children's performance in the national test'. I was informed that Education Scotland accepted that some children will achieve all of the benchmarks, whilst others will not.

The Inspectorate weren't, however, prepared to comment on the appropriateness of standardised national tests at this age nor the likely knock-on effects in terms of practice. This is scarcely surprising since the Inspectorate, now part of Education Scotland, has been tasked by the Scottish Government to help introduce the testing regime.

So P1 teachers are left trying to reconcile two directly conflicting ideologies.

While Upstart Scotland will offer all possible support to the professionals who still intend to implement BtC2, we are convinced that CfE's Early Level is never going to ensure the high-quality

"The political response to the attainment gap is rooted in outdated cultural assumptions"



Noting the divide between Nursery and P1, an illustration adapted from Curriculum for Excellence
Illustration: David Bruce

Are we wobbling on ASL?



@sallycavers

Things move so fast in the additional support for learning world that we could risk missing the point. By Sally Cavers

This summer has seen several Scottish Government consultations in relation to the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) framework. There's an opportunity to respond to proposed amendments to the Code of Practice, revised regulations related to dispute resolution, and changes to do with the ASN Tribunal. At the end of August views were sought on a 10-year strategy for the learning provision for children and young people with complex additional support needs. Meanwhile, the Education Governance report (out for consultation) notes some significant factors about ASL.

Established in 1999, the Enquire service contributed to landmark Scottish ASL legislation. We were proud of this Act which recognised the breadth of reasons why children and young people may need additional support with their learning and established a duty to have these needs met.

We have talked to thousands of parents and carers, helping with issues in relation to supporting their children's needs being met. We have spoken to hundreds of children and young people about their experiences, and what makes a difference. We have met, listened to and been trained by a host of phenomenal practitioners whose passion and dedication is inspiring.

We know that in many areas progress in identifying and providing for those with additional support needs has been very good. Evidence in relation to educational outcomes for many children is positive. However, a number of families who contact Enquire, use

dispute resolution mechanisms, and participate in research reveal that changes are still needed.

In the recent ASN report from the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee, "resources" are frequently mentioned, with a particular emphasis on how limited they are becoming and the impact this has. We often hear from parents struggling with some of the messaging from their child's school or the local authority which suggests their child's needs cannot be met in a way that will allow them to reach "their full potential".

We hear from families who are frustrated with the systems they are encountering and practitioners who cannot do their best within that system.

We hear of parents who are worried about the impact of inclusion on their child's

learning and from children who feel their support changes without review.

This feels a bit like an ASL wobble. We have come so far in developing our schools and support systems, but some hurdles keep tripping us up. Curriculum pressures at secondary level continue to make it more difficult than in primaries to meet the range of needs of

children in our communities. A busy legislative landscape provides more rights for children but does not build in sufficient time to let everything bed in. And we continue to develop parental involvement without providing parents and practitioners with the tools to establish how they

"What we hear makes a significant difference are human exchanges and experience that recognise relationships"

can most effectively work together.

Overwhelmingly, what we hear makes a significant difference – to children and young people, parents and carers or practitioners – are human exchanges and experiences that recognise the relational foundation of us all. Examples are numerous and often so obvious they are overlooked.

Make time to talk when you suspect someone is worried or concerned. As soon as phone calls are not returned, appointments moved, and people rushed it starts an escalation of an issue that may have been resolved quickly on first enquiry.

We also hear a lot about attitudes. School leaders and staff who have a 'can-do' approach and do all in their power to support their school to meet the needs of all its pupils. Parents who train staff and support other parents in their child's school to raise awareness of a specific need. The children and young people who support the genuine inclusion of their peers.

If we could stop and take a breath we might see the path has been laid out. By and large, we are unanimous about our aspiration for children. Maybe if we took the foot off the pedal we'd have the space we need to get us there.

Sally Cavers is Manager of Enquire

> If you have an issue relating to provision of ASL support, Enquire's trained advisors may be able to assist. Call the confidential helpline on 0345 123 2303.

> More information is also available at enquire.org.uk

People, projects, perspectives

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"It's not about Empire building, it's about sharing our model"

The Yard, which provides play and support for disabled children and their families, has published details of the financial impact of its services. In our new members' spotlight, Celine Sinclair explains how it could help others set up similar services across Scotland



Children play in the outdoor area at The Yard, Edinburgh

Loneliness and social isolation are among the greatest challenges faced by disabled children and their families. Although there is very good legislation and policy designed to support the inclusion of disabled children in all settings, we see a disconnect between this and actual experience.

The reality is that many families feel the interests of their child are not fully met in mainstream settings. They may find it difficult to access leisure facilities where their child can feel safe, happy and included. Their child may be unable or not want to attend school, or find it difficult to make friends. Negative experiences like these mean that they feel excluded, and can never entirely relax and be happy.

Feedback from families who use The Yard is that this is a place where they can relax, and feel happier. The children and young

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Indoors at The Yard, Edinburgh

Spotlight on: The Yard Scotland

The Yard has been a member of Children in Scotland since 2011. Staff have attended a range of Children in Scotland conferences and training over the years covering topics including play, risk, and health and wellbeing.

"Children in Scotland provides The Yard with frequent invaluable updates on both policy and practice and ensures that our team is able to keep abreast of any changes and developments within the Sector."

"All of our team benefit from being members through the training they access, the information provided and the network of support."

- Celine Sinclair, The Yard

people, including their siblings, can play freely and safely. At the same time, parents and carers can access respite, information, advice and other family support services. Most importantly, they are all part of a close-knit community where strong and lasting bonds are being formed.

It's true that we are a specialist service and so, on one hand, fly in the face of 'inclusion'. But on the other hand, children who come through our respite and youth clubs grow their confidence and self-esteem, then go on to use mainstream facilities and build friendships beyond The Yard. We are also a building block for the wider world.

I believe our model is effective, and demand is huge. We've gone from supporting 50 families to over 800 within a decade. Many more families in Scotland want to access our services than we can provide for, and so we need to continue to grow. This was the starting point for commissioning an analysis of our social return on investment.

We required something concrete that would give credence to the model we use and demonstrate to local authorities, the Scottish Government, trusts and foundations, and individuals that what we deliver works and is cost-effective.

Having anecdotal evidence just isn't enough anymore. Unless the social benefits of what we put in are analysed and somehow quantified, our impact will never be anything more than anecdotal.

We were extremely lucky that one of our

supporters offered to pay for independent research to be carried out. One of the biggest challenges was the focus groups used to identify individual outcomes because so many of our children and young people have complex disabilities. It meant the groups had to be run over several sessions, researchers had to undergo training, and our staff needed to be present whilst continuing to run a full service. It was an involved piece of work and we were pleased with the set of outcomes that emerged.

Parents and carers reported that their children had better self-esteem and confidence; were happier; had better social networks and felt calmer, which meant better physical health.

"Results show our investment was around £653,000. But the social value of the benefits in economic terms was over £13 million."

Parents and carers said their stress was reduced; their social network was improved and they were less socially isolated because they felt part of a community where they didn't feel judged. They also felt much better informed with relevant knowledge and advice, which wasn't something that we had ever recognised as an outcome of the organisation.

Many of the benefits ran across every member of the family, including siblings.

Assigning a financial value to these intangible outcomes was perhaps less challenging than people assume. We were working with researchers experienced in social return on investment and the

model chosen has been used by other charities working with children and young people who have disabilities.

'Financial proxies' were used to assign financial value to the children and young people's outcomes. For example, the associated financial proxy for better self-esteem, confidence, and being happier was set at £270 per child per year, which is the cost of treating mental health in adolescents. Improvement in their physical health as a result of being calmer was set at £1,318 per year, which is the average cost to the NHS related to injuries and self-harm. All of these result in reduced use of, and therefore reduced cost to, statutory services.

A technique called 'choice modelling' assigned value to parents' and carers' outcomes. They were asked to rank things such as cars or holidays based on their market value, and then to rank the intangible outcomes they had already identified using the tangible things as reference points.

The results show that our investment in 2016/17 was around £653,000. But the social value of the benefits in economic terms was over £13 million. This represents a social return on investment of £20.70 per £1 invested.

So, when a local authority asks 'is there any cost benefit and evidence that this model works?', we will be able to offer this analysis as a snapshot of what the benefits are, both qualitatively and

quantitatively. We'll also use it in applications to funders, trusts and foundations, and it will be available for anyone who would like to set up a similar service in their own local community.

This is not about Empire-building. I don't envisage 'The Yard' exactly like the ones we have in Edinburgh, Dundee and Fife all over Scotland. It's the model that I want to share - an adventure play setting for disabled children and their siblings with wraparound family support. There are many ways that this model can be applied, for example, using special schools or existing community facilities.

We'd be delighted to work with any local authority, third sector organisation or individual to deliver services using this model either directly or in partnership.

Celine Sinclair is Chief Executive of The Yard

> If you would like to find out more about The Yard and any aspect of its work visit theyardscotland.org.uk

> Interview by Nicola Pay

> Photography © Anna Cervinkova
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Children in Scotland is the largest multi-disciplinary network in Scotland dedicated to improving children's lives.

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