



## BRIEFING FROM VOICES FORUM MEETING

### WEDNESDAY 23 JUNE 2021: PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

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#### About Children in Scotland

Giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish is at the heart of everything we do.

By bringing together a network of people working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced, and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support, and develop positive change across all areas affecting children in Scotland.

We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children's rights. Our range of knowledge and expertise means we can provide trusted support on issues as diverse as the people we work with and the varied lives of children and families in Scotland.

#### About the Voices Forum

The Voices Forum brings together Children in Scotland's wide membership to share knowledge and experience in seeking solutions to the issues affecting children, young people and their families in Scotland.

#### 23 June 2021 and a focus on the Programme for Government

The Voices Forum met on Wednesday 23 June 2021 to discuss priorities for the upcoming Programme for Government and how these linked to the calls in the Children in Scotland manifesto.<sup>1</sup>

The group discussed three key manifesto themes – **Health and wellbeing**, **Learning** and **Early years** – based on the expertise of the organisations attending. This briefing has been split into sections based on these themes. We have also added an additional section on **Funding** as this was relevant to all discussions.

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<sup>1</sup> See [Children in Scotland's Manifesto for 2021-26](#).

## **Funding**

It was clear that secure and stable funding continues to be an issue for many of our members across the sector. Discussions about funding came up across different all discussion groups with the same key points highlighted.

Members have repeatedly told us that short-term funding is a significant issue for them. Short-term funding gets in the way of vital relationship-based practice because organisations are not clear whether they will be able to sustain their services in the long term. Organisations were also concerned about being part of a 'race to the bottom', where cost is prioritised over the delivery of quality services.

Sustainable funding for the children's sector is essential if we are to achieve the outcomes we want for children and young people. Plans need to be put forward to ensure that organisations can plan and deliver high-quality services that focus on building long-term, meaningful relationships.

This is highlighted in Children in Scotland's Manifesto for 2021-26.

### **Children in Scotland Manifesto Call:**

- **Sustainable funding for children's services across the statutory, third and private sectors, across all five years of the next Scottish Parliament.**

## **Learning<sup>2</sup>**

Children in Scotland members highlighted key issues that they felt were currently posing challenges for the children and young people that they work with.

### **COVID-19**

COVID-19 and the challenges of learning from home have clearly put strain on the learning opportunities experienced by children and young people. We know from our work the impact that this has had, particularly on those with additional support needs or those who experience disadvantage.<sup>3</sup>

There was concern among our members about a continued lack of understanding of how different home situations could affect learning. One example highlighted was that young people had been given a device but there was a lack of understanding of whether the recipient or their parents had the skills, knowledge and resources to actually use it. Priorities for the group are ensuring that home environments are suitable to support the use of digital devices by improving connectivity, affordability, online safety and the necessary skills and knowledge.

### **Early Intervention and engagement with wider services**

Members also highlighted their concern that policymaking continues to be too reactive and does not focus on early intervention and prevention, despite the value that we know this has.

Members gave examples of early intervention and prevention services that they delivered only being referred into when children and young people are already in

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<sup>2</sup> [Children in Scotland's Manifesto for 2021-26](#), pages 25-28.

<sup>3</sup> See our work with the Inclusion Ambassadors here:

<https://childreninscotland.org.uk/inclusion-ambassadors/>.

crisis. The lack of integration with more holistic, wellbeing-focused services is seen as having a damaging effect on learning.

There was a feeling that schools needed to be supported to engage more effectively with a wider range of services that can provide holistic support to children, young people and families. By accessing this wider support, the group felt that young people would be in a better position to engage with school.

Members pointed out that the attainment challenge funding could be used for this and in some cases is being applied for this use. However, members were also clear that these issues should not purely be responded to through the education system and action was needed on poverty, inequality and supporting families more widely. Our manifesto makes a range of calls in these areas that we feel should be prioritised in the Programme for Government.<sup>4</sup>

There was also support for Children in Scotland's manifesto calls to ensure further integration of youth work and Community Learning and Development with formal education.

### **Children in Scotland Manifesto Call:**

- **Ensuring that we have a diverse workforce supporting the learning of children and young people. Funding must be adequate to operate at a capacity to meet the needs of all children and young people. This should include:**
  - **Publishing a comprehensive Youth Work Strategy and committing adequate funding to fully integrate Youth Work, Community Learning and Development, home link workers and other forms of learning with formal education.**

### Reframing Education

There was a feeling among Children in Scotland members that the recent OECD report gives a chance for a refresh of Scottish Education.

Attendees were concerned about the quality of participation and engagement with children and young people over the period of the pandemic. The ongoing situation with exams and assessments was highlighted as an example – members were clear that young people had made their views known on the topic but had not been listened to. Members felt the Scottish Government response should include a more meaningful role for children and young people in decision-making about education going forward. Other comments included concerns about over-consultation – repeatedly asking children and young people's views, but not acting on them.

Our membership however also felt the report gives Scottish Government a chance for a wider reframing of Curriculum for Excellence and a chance to ensure that wellbeing was given parity of esteem with other sections of the curriculum. Children in Scotland made a similar call in our own manifesto that we believe continues to be relevant for Scottish Government.

### **Children in Scotland Manifesto Call:**

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<sup>4</sup> Children in Scotland manifesto, see theme of poverty and inequality, pages 13-17.

- **We believe that making wellbeing the central focus of Scottish education would be a great step in addressing this. A review of Curriculum for Excellence should be undertaken to explore how wellbeing, relationships and play can be fully embedded in the delivery of education. Recommendations from the review should be implemented before the end of the next parliament.**

## **Health and wellbeing**

The majority of our discussion on the health and wellbeing theme linked back to mental health for children, young people and families.

### Mental health

We covered a number of areas that related to mental health during our conversations with members, including the need for perinatal support, support for LGBT people and a greater commitment to early intervention and prevention.

Members highlighted that they are concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of people they work with. Social isolation and ongoing restrictions on what people can do were highlighted as key issues that were contributing to poor mental health.

The impact of this on new parents was a particular concern. Restrictions in hospitals have affected the support available during pregnancy as partners were not allowed in treatment rooms or during birth. There were concerns about the impact this could have on mental health and family relationships. Our manifesto called for increased perinatal mental health support and these issues highlight the importance of this support in the current context. We know that the perinatal phase can be a challenging time and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these issues.

Members also highlighted that LGBT young people are at greater risk of experiencing mental health issues due to factors such as isolation and not being safe at home or at school (bullying).

One member organisation that works with LGBT young people informed us that CAMHS often send referrals back to them, meaning that these young people are not getting support with their mental health. In addition, trans and non-binary young people experience waiting times of up to three years to access medical treatment and so LGBT Youth Scotland are asking for an 18-week referral to be prioritised.<sup>5</sup>

This highlights the need for improved targeted support for groups at risk of poorer mental health including LGBT young people.

Our members also highlighted the ongoing need for greater funding of early intervention and prevention services. Members voiced frustration that despite long running discussions about the importance of these services, they still have not been fully prioritised by Scottish Government. Members also reiterated that it would be valuable to have a clear definition of what is meant by early intervention and prevention.

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<sup>5</sup> See LGBT Youth Scotland's [manifesto](#) for further information.

These discussions had a clear link to our manifesto calls which have outlined the need for early intervention and prevention services and the areas which we feel should be prioritised within this. We would encourage Scottish Government to consider how the call below can be met in the Programme for Government.

#### **Children in Manifesto call:**

- **Investing in mental health prevention and early intervention for children and young people to stop problems deteriorating to the extent they require specialist CAMHS services. This must include:**
  - **Targeted support for groups at risk of poorer mental health**
  - **Wider, year-round access to mental health-improving universal opportunities such as sport, youth work, play and the arts**
  - **Perinatal mental health/family support**
  - **Counselling, peer support and other talking therapies.**

#### **Early years**

Members highlighted a number of key issues relating to early years policy in Scotland. One initial point of discussion was the ongoing confusion around the definition of 'early years'. People feel there is still a lack of understanding about what ages the early years covers, with some organisation focusing different age ranges from 0 to 8. It was felt that there needed to be greater clarity from the Scottish Government about the full age range the term 'early years' covers.

Members identified that more needs to be done to support participation and engagement work with younger children in order to understand their views and experiences. Members felt that this work is often not properly resourced and works to a small timescale. The incorporation of the UNCRC will place legal duties on government, public authorities and the children's sector to engage with very young children. Greater funding and more understanding of the time needed for this work will be required to ensure their right to be heard is upheld.

A number of other key themes were highlighted in discussion.

#### **Expansion of Early Learning and Childcare**

Members of the group voiced concerns about the quality of experience for children as the Early Learning and Childcare expansion continues to be rolled out. With the expansion continuing, quality must be the priority to ensure good outcomes for all children.

Members highlighted ongoing concerns with pay and employment conditions in the private, voluntary and independent sector (PVI) compared to local authorities. Due to the disparity, many staff are leaving PVI providers to work in local authority services. There is a fear that this is leaving these services with inexperienced staff, causing a knock-on effect on quality. Members highlighted that a national pay scale for early learning and childcare roles should be considered.

#### **Children in Scotland manifesto call:**

- **Delivering early learning and childcare expansion to ensure high quality, accessible and affordable childcare for all families by August 2021. The**

**expansion must reflect individual children's needs and deliver high-quality experiences to improve outcomes for all children.**

### Transitions

Our members highlighted that transitions from nursery to primary school have been a big challenge during COVID-19. Many activities linked to transitions (such as visits to new schools) have been conducted by staff at ELC settings so parents and carers have had less involvement. We also know that transitions have consistently been a challenge for many families, particularly those with children who have an additional support need.

Our members were clear that increased funding is needed for family-based projects/initiatives (e.g. Stay, Play and Learn). Members were also clear that increasing numbers of family learning officers would help in this area. People highlighted the benefit this has had when schools have used Attainment Challenge Funding in this area.

### **Children in Scotland Manifesto call:**

- **Ensure that good transition pathways are in place to all Early Learning and Childcare provision and services.**

### Family support

Children in Scotland members highlighted that clarity is needed about relationship-based family support. There was a feeling that there continues to be a lack of detail about the offer to families in this area. We know a range of our members have done a lot of work in this area and continue to be frustrated by a lack of progress.

It is important that the Scottish Government make a clear commitment to a joined-up system of relationship-based, universal and targeted support services. This should be aimed at supporting families at an early stage but be available across childhood. The Promise has laid out a clear path towards this and should be made a reference point.

Children in Scotland's manifesto also made a number of calls in this area.

### **Children in Scotland manifesto calls:**

- **Investing in a joined-up system of universal and targeted support services for families in the crucial first few years of life when children are aged zero to two. Relationship-based interventions must be a central point of this so that families receive the help they need early on to enable them to provide the best possible start for their children.**
- **Investing in relationship-based family support. A coherent national approach is necessary to guarantee that all families receive the support they need for as long as they need, and to ensure families do not fall through the cracks of a piecemeal network of support services.**