

Supporting families in the early years: what opportunities do Early Learning and Childcare settings offer?

Event report

March 2020





Jackie Brock,
Chief Executive Officer,
Children in Scotland



Satwat Rehman,
Director,
One Parent Families Scotland



Clare Simpson,
Manager,
Parenting Across Scotland

Background

One Parent Families Scotland, Parenting Across Scotland and Children in Scotland took a proposal for a roundtable to discuss support for families provided alongside the Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) offer to the Scottish Government ELC team in 2019.

These organisations recognise the wealth of work underway to strengthen support for families as part of the ELC expansion programme including the eligible twos provision, the deposit pilot, and the programme's independent evaluation. There are also many related areas across the policy landscape from a family support, child poverty and inequality, and employability policy lens.

The expansion puts families in touch with services more universally and offers the opportunity to provide families with support. These organisations feel that while there are pockets of excellence there is not a universal approach to embedding support for families in the ELC offer, and wanted to scope how this could be achieved during this critical opportunity to shape services and ensure that families get the support they need.

Principles

Support for all families should follow from a core set of evidence-based principles. These principles are general and comprehensive, drawing from a range of sources and reflect the Scottish Government's programme:

1. This is a universal approach for all families.
2. All parents have strengths and assets. Support will be available to help these to be realised when their children are at the stage of attending ELC.
3. Policy development should be place-based and centred around ELC settings where support is available to all families with young children. There should be no eligibility criteria. We need to ensure that smaller communities of interest or those with specific needs are actively supported to be part of place-based offer.
4. Policy development will of necessity be phased and prioritised. We recognise that eligible 2-year olds should be the priority.

The key components of a sustainable offer of support to families with children in an ELC setting should be:

- Information and advice provided using a drop-in model, promoted proactively and open to all families
- Where appropriate, more intensive services provided to meet the needs of the family
- Based on a locality model linking in with other key services
- Relationship-based
- A universal offer within the locality but targeted sensitively, for example to families with eligible 2s. This will be planned differently depending on local context.
- Underpinned by partnership across the locality that draws on all early years settings that are providing high quality and affordable early years learning and childcare and which share expertise and learning across their locality; supports, using targeted evidence based early interventions, families in greatest need, in the context of integrated children's services and community empowerment and planning.

The roundtable was an exploratory discussion to identify what needs to happen and how to take this forward.

Programme

A broad range of organisations was represented, mainly from the third sector. However some key stakeholders, namely COSLA, Early Years Scotland, SCMA and regulatory bodies were unable to attend, so while the roundtable provided a useful starting point there needs to be further discussion.

Three key questions were posed to attendees:

1. What are the key components of supporting families where ELC settings are part of the support offer?
2. What benefits are achieved as a result of supporting families as part of a child's ELC service and experience?
3. What would make it easier to support families in a planned and sustainable way?

Ingela Naumann, Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, University of Edinburgh opened the event to set the scene and consider the bigger picture. Ingela talked about child centred policy and was clear that child policy needed to include families to be truly effective. She went on to consider the elements we need to pay attention to such as ensuring happy relationships between staff and proper consideration of the space and the hours offered. Ingela discussed some of the tensions in the development of policy in Scotland particularly concerning terminology and purpose, arguing:

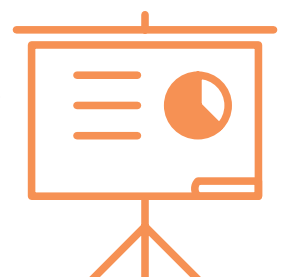
“There is no hierarchy between knowledge and love, between early education and childcare.”

Other contributions were provided by:

- **Cheryl Brown**, Chief Executive, Midlothian SureStart
- **Isobel Lawson**, Chief Executive Officer, Stepping Stones for Families
- **Councillor Karen Conaghan**, Ward 3 Dumbarton, Depute Provost, Convenor for Education



Links to presentations from Dr. Ingela Naumann, Stepping Stones and Midlothian Surestart can be found **here**.



Key components

Attendees were overall in agreement about the core components of services that support families as outlined above and specifically mentioned:

- ▣ **Family wellbeing**
- ◇ **Accessible language**
- ▣ **Holistic view of support**
- ◇ **Integrated**
- ▣ **Normalised**
- ◇ **Cross sectoral**
- ▣ **Consistency**
- ◇ **Real choice**
- ▣ **Rights based**



The **main themes** from the discussion groups concentrated on the following areas with a summary of the main points made below

Family support needs

There was detailed discussion about the needs of families with attendees focussing on the need for peer support, flexibility and equity across Scotland. It was agreed we need to look at local need and build funding around this, based on what communities want using a holistic view of community. Parental engagement is key to setting goals in any provision or services.

Some felt there is a need for family support to be viewed as an entitlement as any family can need support. Delegates mentioned the need to start support from the peri-natal stage instead of focusing on three and four year olds and some two year olds. Critically it was felt that we need to strengthen family relationships, as a child will still struggle if families have complex problems, whatever the ELC setting.

Threats to existing support were mentioned with existing pockets of support are disappearing because of extended hours of ELC.

The type of support for families was discussed included the basics: cooking/ providing food as well as housing, work, benefits and ELC advice. Attendees suggested it doesn't always have to be an 'intervention'; a light touch of family support is sometimes what makes the difference. However, the need to



increase family income was also stated as was empowering parents to support each other.

People's lives are messy, so a strong generalist approach is needed with a softer transaction and one point of contact. Families need space in early learning settings which is confidential, safe and protected and should be thought of at design stage in centres (this is already in the Scottish Government guidance Space to Grow).

Learning cited from other work included the Community Planning Partnership experience and the fact that caution is required around terminology to avoid the word 'support'. Similarly, the Glasgow Family Support Strategy development had found an attempt to come up with a definition is challenging.

Relationships

Delegates noted that relationships are critical and making the most of established relationships is important as are the real voices of families; any support must be non-stigmatising and preferably in familiar places and settings.

Importantly staff know families and can enable uptake to services.

Discussions also noted that community engagement is time consuming with consideration needed to properly embed this.

Workforce

Points made included that training for the workforce is needed to support practitioners to have a better understanding and awareness of families' circumstances and to work with families (not only for family support staff). The new health visitor pathway and family nurse partnerships offer considerable opportunity for sharing information with families.

In order to provide support to families in ELC it is crucial to have a flexible workforce (which includes childminders) and for organisations to support practitioners.

Some noted that an upskilling of practitioners to work with both children and parents for holistic support would be beneficial.

Systems issues were raised such as union involvement in changes to culture and the roles of early years workers.

The early years workforce requirements include supporting ambition, clear roles and a holistic approach to career progression and the right support to employees.



Partnerships

Groups discussed the importance of making use of local knowledge and networks and harnessing local resources and assets (such as older people services and community resources such as libraries).

There needs to be multi-agency engagement with health visitors, GPs, social workers, the community and other local specialist agencies to allow true partnerships.

We need to link services to allow conversations, help facilitate partnerships and structure local planning. Delegates discussed where the locus for this model or service is locally.

Sustainability

In tables attendees talked about the investment necessary for services and a creative use of budgets. There was significant debate about the different funding that exists for voluntary and statutory sectors with an urgent need to consider planning for sustainability. The type of short-term grants prevalent in third sector funding result in short term services which are difficult for children, and families. The current funding context can have the effect of re-triggering disrupted attachments.

A strong network of organisations to provide services is available if there is sustainable, long term funding. Also, local projects could be supported to scale up their offer.

Delegates wondered what digital tools could be used to support the sector and what evidence base is currently being referred to.

Attendees raised the principle of funding follows the child and how this could be applied to early years services more broadly.

Universalism and early intervention

There was broad support for the principle of universalism to break down barriers. Linked to the sustainability points made, delegates discussed the benefits of this approach from an early intervention perspective. In groups discussion considered Getting it Right for Every Child and what more could be done to realise its intention.

Groups discussed the 'middle' of support which is not high tariff but more than universal services, and is often missed and can prevent families from moving on to more high tariff services. Strong generalist support is important with families being referred on or supported to use other services.

Attendees talked about the positive aspects of systems change and the potential reductions in costs to the system by early intervention. The cost benefit analysis by Stepping Stones for Families identified the preventative impact of providing early support to families.

Examples

During the discussion several different services were highlighted and attendees were familiar with a range of local examples. This is not new territory so following agreement of support for the principles outlined above it is felt that some key changes could yield significant results.

From the knowledge and expertise in the room, some possible options were suggested:

- Maximise Children 1st
- Early Years Scotland 'Stay and Play'
- Stepping Stones for Families Wellbeing Service
- SureStart Family Learning Centres
- Edges of Care services
- Glasgow Together consortium
- Local Authority Family Learning Centre model
- Open Kindergartens (Children in Scotland and Parenting across Scotland)

Some changes to local planning structures would make identification of a model easier based on the best local fit, a multi-agency partnership and shared outcomes for children and families.

Suggestions and next steps



As indicated, it is easy to find exemplars across Scotland, but the challenge is embedding this approach nationally. The expansion of Early Learning and Childcare provides the perfect opportunity to do this with all the points above in line with the National Improvement Framework, GIRFEC and other policy ambitions. Our recommendations are:

- There is currently a range of different ways in which local authorities organise responsibility for family support. There should be a consistent approach adopted providing a pathway of support for families linked to ELC and school.
- To enable this family centred approach, local authorities should be supported to use connected budgets to fund family support work rather than only using Children and Families budgets.
- There is ample evidence of the impact of support for families in the early years. There should be more consistency in expected inputs and outcomes in local commissioning models for organisations providing these services.

References

Collaborative CYP Model: interrupting the intergenerational cycle:

<http://www.knowledge.scot.nhs.uk/ahpcypcommunity.aspx>

Joining the dots: A better start for Scotland's Children. An independent report by Professor Susan Deacon:

https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/docs/default-source/members/divisions/scotland/scotland-faculties-child-joining-the-dots.pdf?sfvrsn=ab8ad66d_2

Stepping Stones for Families' Family Wellbeing Service: evaluation:

gcph.co.uk/publications/894_stepping_stones_for_families_family_wellbeing_service_evaluation

Audit Scotland report: Early learning and childcare:

<https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/early-learning-and-childcare>



Appendix – attendees

1. **Alan Sinclair** – Consultant
2. **Alison Clancy** – PAS
3. **Alison Cumming** – Scottish Government
4. **Alison Hay** – CHANGE
5. **Alison Matthews** – National Lottery Community Fund
6. **Alison Watson** – Shelter Scotland
7. **Anthony O'Malley** – CHANGE
8. **Brigid Daniel** – Queen Margaret University
9. **Catherine McDerment** – NHS Lothian
10. **Cheryl Brown** – Midlothian Sure Start
11. **Clare Simpson** – PAS
12. **David Mackay** – Children in Scotland
13. **Dr Kristina Konstantoni** – University of Edinburgh
14. **Fiona Crawford** – GCPH
15. **Gillian Eunson** – National Lottery Community Fund
16. **Ingela Naumann** – University of Edinburgh
17. **Isobel Lawson** – Stepping Stones for Families
18. **Jacqueline Cassidy** – Children in Scotland
19. **Joanne Gibson** – NHS Lanarkshire
20. **Joe Griffin** – Scottish Government
21. **Karen Conaghan** – Convenor for Education
22. **Liz Nolan** – Aberlour
23. **Luke Addison** – University of Edinburgh
24. **Maureen McAteer** – Barnardo's
25. **Michael Chalmers** – Scottish Government
26. **Niamh O'Connor** – Scottish Government
27. **Sally Cavers** – Children in Scotland
28. **Satwat Rehman** – One Parent Families Scotland
29. **Sharon Laing** – Aberlour
30. **Susan McGhee** – Flexible Childcare Services Scotland

Supporting Families in the early years



Supporting families in the early years: a graphic minute

Eilidh Henry, 2019

Supporting families in the early years: what opportunities do Early Learning and Childcare settings offer?

Event report

December 2020



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot