



Parenting Across Scotland Early Years Framework Response

Parenting Across Scotland is a partnership of children's charities and adult relationship organisations working together to provide a focus for issues and concerns affecting parents and families in Scotland.

The PAS partners are:

CHILDREN 1st

Aberlour Childcare Trust

Capability Scotland

One Parent Families Scotland

Relationships Scotland

Scottish Adoption Association

Scottish Marriage Care

Stepfamily Scotland.

Parenting Across Scotland welcomes the revisions made to the Early Years Framework document and the consequent changes to both the content and tone of the document. It now feels like a more family friendly document. We particularly welcome the fact that there is now greater recognition of parents in the process rather than previous incarnations of the Framework which appeared to view parents very much as passive recipients of services.

There are, however, still a number of ways in which the Framework could more effectively improve outcomes for children by providing better support and recognition for parents. In responding to the Framework, PAS consulted its partners and the general themes and the specific comments detailed below are taken from partners' replies.

In particular, PAS has concerns about the following areas:

- Universal support for parents
- Childcare
- Child poverty
- Adult relationships support
- Evaluation

Universal support for parents

PAS welcomes the Framework's recognition that universal provision of support services for parents is essential in achieving favourable outcomes for

children and families. PAS sees health visitors as a key component of this support. Research from GUS and PAS' forthcoming MORI poll backs up this view with a high level of trust in and support for health visiting services from parents themselves. Health visitors act as a crucial support for parents in the early stages of their children's lives - because they visit parents in their homes at a time when early support needs can be identified and referred onto more specialist services where necessary, health visitors are key to making sure that these needs are addressed at an early stage before needs turn into crisis in line with the Scottish Government's stated aim of early intervention.

We are concerned that given this high level of support for and acceptance of health visiting services among parents, this universal provision is under threat through the targeting of services in HALL4 and the proposal of a generic community nurse role envisaged in the Review of Community Nursing. Additionally, health visitor numbers are falling as a consequence of uncertainty about their professional future, lack of training opportunities and the rising average age of health visitors.

PAS sees health visiting as an essential base for universal provision upon which more intensive support needs can be identified and built upon. Rather than designing a new base of universal support, we feel that it is essential that this core service which is so valued by parents is protected and strengthened. A comprehensive and well resourced health visiting service would then be able to refer parents with more intensive support needs onto more specialist services mentioned in the Framework such as the Family Nurse Partnership and other intensive parenting programmes.

It is imperative that the Scottish Government ensures that Scotland's parents continue to have the support they value from a professional, well resourced health visiting service.

Childcare

PAS' forthcoming MORI poll, the experience of PAS partners' projects and the Scottish Government's own research (Perspectives on Early Years Services: Qualitative Research with Service Users) for the Early Years Framework identify childcare as a major concern for parents and a barrier to accessing both employment and education. These concerns need to be adequately addressed to overcome the structural inequalities which currently lead to such divergent outcomes for Scotland's children. While we welcome the Framework's commitment to dialogue about childcare issues with Westminster, it is essential that the Scottish Government is proactive in this important area.

More specific comments are detailed below in the Specific comments section of this response.

Child poverty

The contribution that the Early Years Framework can make to the Scottish Government's commitment to the eradication of child poverty is immense. It is, therefore, essential that the two policies are thoroughly integrated so that both achieve their linked objectives. Currently, this does not appear to be fully

realised in the Framework document. Accordingly, PAS has made some more detailed suggestions in the Specific comments by page number below.

Adult relationships support

PAS was set up to support parents in their crucial role of bringing up children. In forming the partnership, it was recognised that the adult relationship is vitally important in achieving positive outcomes for children and families and accordingly adult relationship organisations are a key part of our partnership.

As it stands, the Framework document misses the opportunity to build on work in integrating support for adult relationships into universal support for parents. PAS sees support for adult relationships as an essential part of the support matrix required for parents in the early years and beyond.

Research shows that the quality of the adult relationship is one of the main factors in determining positive outcomes for children. Conflict between the parents in bringing up the children has a negative impact on the child's outcomes whether the adult relationship is one where the parents are together or apart. Accordingly, there are a range of support types for the adult relationship, whatever its current status, which can reduce conflict and consequently impact positively on children's outcomes. PAS urges that this is explicitly recognised and given greater importance within the Framework.

Relationship support should be viewed as a preventative measure rather than as a 'last chance' option. Relationship difficulties often became evident in the early years when the focus of time and energy is transferred to the needs of the child and away from the couple and when the stresses of work and life balance are at their height.

Where relationships have broken down, family mediation can play a vital role in reducing conflict between the parents, allowing them to agree on joint parenting issues and thus enabling the children to successfully negotiate the transition towards a new family set-up.

Where parental conflict remains, child contact centres can provide children and non-resident parents a safe and supportive environment to spend meaningful time together.

Evaluation

Given the importance of the Framework in achieving a number of the Scottish Government's key objectives and its potential impact on long term outcomes, it is crucial that comprehensive evaluation of the Framework and its action plan is built in from the outset. Evaluation should be both qualitative and quantitative and recognising that many of the outcomes will only be measurable in the long term should include a formative element that can inform any adjustments needed to the action plan.

There is a need for longitudinal data to track the impact of changes on families to supplement the Growing Up in Scotland study which cannot be disaggregated to local authority level due to its sample size.

Specific comments by page number

Page 4 Introductory section

This section should make reference to the target of eradication of child poverty and the importance of the framework to it.

In the paragraph near the end referring to “life beyond early years”, it would be helpful to refer to the intention to build up community capacity to support parents and children throughout their lives.

Page 6 Our Vision (parental entitlements)

Parents are entitled to be able to access relationship support to enable them to provide a nurturing home environment for their children that is free from conflict.

Page 7 Measuring progress

Poverty: existing national indicator on poverty should be amended to reduce number of children in poverty, disaggregated by family structure.

Parental Skills: in the section proposing new indicators, measuring parental skills/ readiness may not be a measurable indicator and therefore is not achievable. We would suggest that this should not be used as an indicator.

Maternal health: since one of the key factors shown to affect parenting ability is maternal health there should be an indicator which assesses maternal health, both physical and mental, for example, reduced percentage of post natal depression and reduced proportion of mothers reporting problems with their health.

Involvement of children in pro social activities: This should include numbers of children and parents attending formal childcare and community groups such as parent and toddler groups or family centres with monitoring information collected to show gender, ethnicity and disability of parents and children.

Children's attainment: there should be an additional indicator around increased proportion of children attaining national standards of literacy and numeracy.

Page 9 For parents

PAS would like to stress the importance of the adult relationship to children's outcomes and would therefore suggest adding something along the lines of: Parents encourage their children to develop positive and respectful relationships by demonstrating these values in their own partnerships. They receive support and advice to help them do so.

For services

Services recognise the importance of parents as carers who know what's best for their children and engage them in designing individual plans to address their unique needs and design services accordingly.

Page 11 Diagram

There needs to be an additional bubble showing relationship and family support.

Page 18 Valuing children, parents and families - What more do we need to do

PAS would suggest that an additional task under this heading is:

Promote the role of relationship and family support in enabling children to live in nurturing and caring home environments.

Page 21 Partnership with families and communities

It would be helpful here to include a mention of the different needs of particular groups when developing partnership including parents with disability issues, BME families and lesbian and gay families.

The Stronger Families programme in Western Australia which helps families to engage effectively with agencies working with them may be a useful model to engage with to build effective partnerships.

Page 25 Strengthening universal provision as a basis for prevention and early intervention

In the section on ante natal care PAS is keen that there should be reference to engagement with the other parent, generally the father who is often left out at the key ante natal stage, which then misses out on the chance to build on a presumption of both parents' involvement at this key stage.

Page 26 Police

Police engagement would be helpful both in relation to child protection concerns and community capacity building through diversionary activities for children and young people.

Page 27 Delivering early intervention through universal services

In the first paragraph, the set of identified core needs should include reference to relationship support.

Directory of services: we would welcome the idea of this being included.

This should be linked to later points about Childcare Information Services giving parents information on sources of help, and should also mention link to Parenting Strategies and assessment of directories already available such as one held by One Parent Families Scotland and Government commissioned Directory of disability services being compiled by Quarriers.

Incentive schemes for hard to reach groups: it would be worth mentioning offering help such as free childcare linked to information days on services or small scale grant assistance to families as a mechanism to engage them (e.g:

Stirling Council Youth Services offers small grants to young people being housed as an engagement tool).

Meeting individual needs

Sexual orientation ought to be included in the list of individuals who may have different or higher needs.

Page 28 Transitions: As well as the key transitions mentioned here in children's lives, transitions in adults' lives also have an impact on children's lives and outcomes and this section should therefore include mention of this and should refer to family breakdown and formation of step families, including the particular needs of newly formed lesbian and gay families.

There needs to be a recognition within the Framework of the importance of the adult relationship to children's outcomes.

Counselling and mediation services generally already have a strong focus on the needs of children, however more could be done to highlight the importance of relationship support as a preventative measure instead of it being viewed as a 'last chance' option. Many couples report that their relationship difficulties became evident following the birth of their first child, a time when the focus of time and energy is transferred to the needs of the child and away from the couple.

Counselling can support couples to understand these changes and to re-establish communication and intimacy, which in turn has a very positive impact on the life of the family as a whole.

Where relationships do break down, family mediation can play a vital role in reducing conflict between the parents, allowing them to agree on joint parenting issues and thus enabling the children to successfully negotiate the transition towards a new family set-up.

Where parental conflict remains, child contact centres can provide children and non-resident parents a safe and supportive environment to spend meaningful time together.

Page 28 Sustaining the intervention

It would be helpful for schools to develop close links with community support agencies and make use of service directories so that they can assist parents and children to access appropriate sources of help.

Page 29 What more we need to do

Para here on core needs should also refer to relationship support.

Page 31 Services based on what works

What more we need to do: It would be useful to add in a reference to drawing on evidence from throughout UK.

Relationship support should be recognised as one of the core needs of families, however the parenting programmes mentioned do not address that aspect, nor the ways in which parents can engage with their community to get support for their families, therefore the use of these programmes should be supplemented by additional programmes to help families with these other aspects.

Page 32 Services that meet the needs of children and families

Flexibility and integration: This section should acknowledge the needs of employed parents and of lone parents will be required to seek employment when their children reach 7 and therefore will need help to prepare for this.

Affordability

It is very disappointing that this section focuses primarily on influencing Westminster policies on tax credits and makes no reference for the continued need to develop other strategies to make childcare more affordable in the context of assisting parents to move into employment. Progress on this front is vital for lone parents seeking to escape child poverty. Evidence is already emerging of shortage of childcare funding in further and higher education as more lone parents apply to colleges to improve their qualifications in anticipation of the forthcoming changes in welfare benefits. If the framework omits this issue, children in lone parent families in Scotland will be seriously disadvantaged compared to children elsewhere in the UK and correspondingly, Scottish Government progress on achieving child poverty targets will be slower.

What more we need to do

Under this would suggest adding:

Fathers: Address the bias in existing services to dealing only with mothers through systematic strategies to engage fathers with services.

Page 36 Services that meet the needs of children and families - what more do we need to do

Ensure national coverage for relationship counselling, family mediation and child contact centres, and ensure greater diversity of access by all sections of the community.

Page 38 Developing a highly skilled workforce

Diversity: Under what more we need to do, there needs to be reference to the need to improve the diversity of the workforce, particularly in relation to gender and ethnicity.

Page 40 Delivering change

National structure: PAS strongly agrees with the need for developing an ongoing national structure and suggests that this should involve engagement with all key stakeholders to exchange experience in framework implementation and to make information available to those planning services locally. PAS has an important role to play here in providing co-ordinated access to services, strategic engagement at a policy level and support for strategic engagement of parents.

National outcomes: Extensive work is required to develop co-ordinated mechanisms for measuring the impact of integrated services on children and families, and ensuring that the views of parents and children are incorporated into this. Reference should be made to developments in England in this respect.

Page 42 Capacity of small voluntary organisations

Small voluntary organisations are key providers of important services to children and families at both local and national level. The Framework must find ways of helping small organisations to engage through support from intermediary bodies and through partnership arrangements with larger organisations.

Page 43 Action Plan

Services: In line with earlier comments on affordability, PAS would like to see the Scottish Government also commit to exploring other ways of ensuring that childcare is affordable for low income families, especially lone parents affected by welfare reform.

HMIE inspections of further education colleges should specifically look at their accessibility for parents as part of their Access remit.

Page 46 A strategic approach

A strategic approach needs to add in that there should be effective links to local employability strategies.

Page 48 Resources section

It is important that this section makes some mention of Scottish Government commitment to target of elimination of child poverty.

Given the importance of the Early Years Framework for attainment of the child poverty target, it is very disappointing that the framework is being put forward by the Government with no additional resourcing. Evidence from previous change agendas in public services is that change involving improved co-ordination between different services is achieved much more readily if resources are made available to facilitate it. Even pilot funding initiatives allocated on a competitive basis can be helpful for this process. It is particularly worrying that the Framework commits to a 20% increase in free school entitlement for 3 and 4 year olds in 2010 and offers no extra resourcing to do that (in addition to the recently announced commitment to free school meals). These commitments, combined with the sudden increase in inflation are a recipe for major problems in resourcing the framework and may well jeopardise the whole exercise.

Page 49 Surestart

The reference to the use of Surestart funding to resource the Framework is worrying because in many areas these funds have been used to support the voluntary sector and identifying them as the key funding source for this framework risks unfairly penalising this sector in relation to the statutory sector.