Scotland's children's services landscape: The views and experiences of the children's services workforce

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Summary report

The Children's Services Reform Research study is a Scotland-based research study being undertaken by CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection. In 2022, CELCIS was asked by the Scottish Government to carry out this research study with the aim of gathering evidence to inform decision-making about how best to deliver children's services in Scotland in light of the proposed introduction of the National Care Service, and its commitment to Keep the Promise of the Independent Care Review (2020).

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Context of the research

In 2021, the Scottish Government published the findings of an Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland (Feeley, 2021) and recommended the creation of a National Care Service for adult social care. Later that year when the Scottish Government launched its consultation on the National Care Service, it included a proposal that children's social work and social care services should be included within it. Whether or not to integrate systems, processes, services, or agencies is a big decision. When the systems in question include the nationwide delivery of support through children's social work and social care services, the implications are even wider.

In this context, it is important that decisions are made with the fullest understanding of the available evidence and information.

About the Children's Services Reform Research study

The purpose of the research study is to answer the question: "**What is needed to ensure that children, young people and families get the help they need, when they need it?**". The study has four separate strands of work, which together aim to provide a comprehensive and holistic approach to answering this question. A final report will be published at the end of the study which will draw together and synthesise all four strands of the findings to address the research question.

An Independent Steering Group chaired by Professor Brigid Daniel, Professor Emerita at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, has supported the design, implementation and delivery of the research study.

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How we did this research

The views and experiences of Scotland's children's services workforce are critical to understand as they have direct experience of how children's services are delivered, managed or commissioned, and important insights into how services are experienced by children, young people and families. For the purposes of our study, we defined the children's services workforce as practitioners who provide support, care and/or protection for children, young people and families who need the support of services. This includes social work, health, early learning and childcare, education, youth justice, police and third sector services.

This is the fourth strand of work within the Children's Services Reform Research study, and we asked the research question: What are the perspectives and experiences of Scotland's children's services workforce of the current service landscape?

To answer this question, we ran an online survey, focus groups and interviews with members of the children's services workforce.

We asked about their experiences of local services for children, young people and families, including statutory, universal, third sector and specialist services; multi-agency working; continuity of support when young people transition from children's services to adult services; children, young people and families' relationships with practitioners and participation in decision-making; the support the workforce receives and needs; and their experiences of leadership and the ability of leaders to bring about change. We also asked respondents to identify what has improved over time and what challenges exist in each of these areas.

1399 survey responses	← All sectors of workforce
	← Every local authority
13 focus groups	← 66 frontline practitioners
15 individual or group interviews	← 25 senior leaders of children's services

Figure 1: responses from online survey, focus groups and interviews with the children's services workforce

In the focus groups and interviews, we explored two further topics: the children's services workforce's perceptions of the influence of integration on outcomes for children, young people and families; and what the children's services workforce believe needs to be in place to best meet the needs of children, young people and families.

We carried out a detailed analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data from the responses to the survey, the focus groups discussions and the interviews. The full findings are presented in our main report, Scotland's Children's Services Landscape: The Views and Experiences of the Children's Services Workforce (McTier et al., 2023a), with the use of statistical charts and quotes to illustrate key points. Further information about the methodology is contained in our Supplementary Report (Manole et al., 2023).
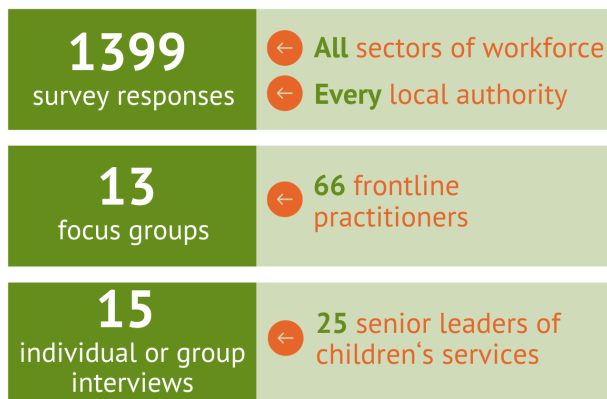
What we found

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on Scotland's children's services

This research highlights how significant the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been on Scotland's children's services. Reflecting on experiences before the pandemic, services were perceived to have been improving (with the exception of young people's transitions to adult services), but the experience of the pandemic has halted many of these improvements and led to a perception that local services for children, young people and families have got worse.

The members of the workforce who worked through the COVID-19 pandemic are also exhausted, and this is exacerbated by the need to respond to greater demand and the more complex needs of children, young people and families.

Scotland's children's services are responding to greater diversity and complexity of need

Increasing levels of mental health difficulties and additional support needs among children, young people and families are increasing the demand for services. At the same time, the rising cost of living is contributing to more children, young people and families experiencing the pressures of poverty and housing instability.

Cuts to public sector budgets, the closure of key services, and the staffing crisis in the recruitment and retention of people to the children's services workforce, are making it more challenging to respond as the level of investment in services and in the workforce is not keeping up with demand.

The children's services workforce is in crisis and urgently needs investment

The children's services workforce is passionate, highly committed, and working extremely hard to build supportive relationships with Scotland's children, young people and families and best meet

their needs. However, it is a workforce that has been in crisis for some time with unmanageable workloads and high levels of sickness, absence, turnover and vacancies. Without investment in the workforce, the high-quality relational, strengths-based and trauma-informed practice that children, young people and families value and need cannot be provided.

Some employers are taking action to address these challenges but the measures are at a small scale, are not provided equally to all parts of the children's services workforce, and are not changing the public or media perceptions of what it is like to work in the children's services sector. National and co-ordinated attention and investment in the workforce is needed.

The legislative, policy and funding landscape is cluttered and inadvertently hindering implementation

The volume of policies, frameworks, legislation and programmes across Scotland's children's services landscape in recent years has led to a cluttered landscape. The foundations on which Scotland's children's services are built, particularly the UNCRC (1989), Getting It Right For Every Child (2012), and The Promise of the Independent Care Review (2020), are widely supported and endorsed. However, these are not always fully aligned and the number of additional legislative, policy and funding developments targeted at different parts of the children's services system is challenging and confusing.

New developments, which often have unrealistic timeframes for implementation and assessment of their impact, are diverting leadership and workforce attention and resources. There is a concern from the workforce that potentially beneficial developments are being abandoned too soon, and the learning from previously effective approaches is being forgotten.

There are persistent longstanding gaps and weaknesses in services and transitions

A number of longstanding service gaps and weaknesses in Scotland's children's services continue to persist. Some are specific to children's services including:

- The provision of preventative and early intervention services, such as family support and parenting services.
- Access to specialist health services, particularly mental health services.
- Access to supports for children with additional support needs.

Other gaps and weaknesses stretch across children's and adult services:

- Holistic family support where adult services and children's services work together to respond to the needs of families as a whole.
- Transitions for young people into support from adult services.
- Recovery services for children, young people and adults who have experienced trauma for as long as they need these.

A different approach to implementing change is needed, not least having a dedicated long-term national and local focus on each of these gaps and weaknesses that builds on Scotland's growing understanding of what it takes to implement change.

The workforce needs long-term clarity, commitment and investment from national and local leaders

More co-ordinated leadership across all levels is needed to address the many challenges faced by Scotland's children's services. Key functions that the workforce said need to be in place are:

- Long-term clarity of policy direction and vision over a 10-20 year timeframe.
- Co-ordination between national and local leadership so that the long-term vision and agreed policy direction is held at all structural levels and geographies.
- Long-term commitment to children, young people and families so that support can follow them as long as they need it.

- A strong national children's services voice so that the needs of the sector are not lost in wider policy discussions.
- An agreed set of outcomes, and supporting indicators, that are tied to the long-term vision.
- The provision of longer-term funding, but with flexibility in commissioning to meet local needs.
- The design of effective policies and programmes that is built on a clear description of how and why a change is expected to happen.

The expectations and requirements of leaders are significant. Scotland's children's services leaders therefore also need to be supported, including technical support around change methodologies, and mentoring and peer support.

Service structures need to enable and support practitioners to work together at the local level

We did not find any association between different levels of structural integration and the workforce's experiences of services, nor did the workforce share any strong opinions on what a restructure of Scotland's children's services could or should look like. Instead, the main sentiment expressed about any potential restructure of Scotland's children's services was one of unease, including that:

- It would lead to significant upheaval at a time when the sector is under substantial pressure.
- Whatever the design of the restructure, no structure can encompass all services that children, young people and families need. There will consequently always be some boundaries where different services will need to work together to support children, young people and families.
- There is an 'opportunity cost' argument that the financial and human resources necessary to deliver a restructure would be better allocated to improving services, building inter-practitioner relationships, and investing in the workforce.
- There was concern around whether Scotland's children's services leadership has the necessary skills, knowledge and capacity to deliver a significant restructure.

While there was no strong support for a significant national and/or local restructure in services and delivery, there was recognition that structures could facilitate enhanced multi-agency working to the benefit of children, young people and families. At the national level, there could be benefit in:

- Developing a national statement of service expectations to support more consistent services and practice across the country.
- Establishing nationally consistent means of referral and points of access into different services.
- Investing in an integrated data and IT infrastructure.

For the workforce, the priority was given to partnership working arrangements at the local or community level that enable practitioners to work closely and flexibly with colleagues from other services. Any strengthening of national structures, bodies or functions would therefore need to allow for 'local footprints and flexibility' so that local, community needs are responded to.

Every service type should be valued as a key strategic and delivery partner

Multi-agency working requires respect for all service types and practitioner roles. Any hierarchies that exist between different professions must be challenged with the aim of fostering a culture of respect and team-working to best meet the needs of children, young people and families.

There is a particularly strong need to more fully involve third sector organisations in the planning and commissioning of services, and to listen to the voices of practitioners that often know individual children, young people and families best (for example, early learning and childcare

and/or family support workers) in the assessment, planning and delivery of child's plans. Addressing imbalances in pay, terms and conditions across different services and sectors can support this sense of equity and respect across partners.

> **An integrated IT and data infrastructure would support practitioners to work together**

The multiple IT and management information systems that exist within and across different services is a common frustration, impeding practice and how children, young people and families can best be supported. There was therefore a desire expressed for integrated IT and data systems that facilitate the efficient sharing of information, and also support the development of multi-agency chronologies, assessments and child's plans.

There is also a need for a common set of outcomes and quality indicators that all services can work towards and report on. This would help to simplify and standardise reporting, but more importantly, help to ensure all services are oriented towards the same national vision and policy direction to support children, young people and families.

Limitations of this research

We heard from over 1,400 members of Scotland's children's services workforce. We do, however, acknowledge that those engaging in the research were motivated or interested to do so, and their views may differ from those who did not take part. There were also sectoral and local authority variations in the number of survey responses, for example, 41% of responses were from people working in social work. The national findings reported may consequently be more representative of the views and experiences of the highest responding sectors and local authority areas.

Areas for future research

Our work for this strand of the research study has highlighted several areas that would benefit from future research:

- In relation to children and young people's transitions into adult services, there is a need to engage with the adult services workforce and the young adults they support to understand what issues, barriers and enablers they are experiencing and whether these align with those expressed by the children's services workforce.

- Our findings offered some limited insight into what quality services and practice look like. Future work to explore what good quality practice exists, what this practice looks like, and what factors support and hinder this practice, would be highly beneficial.

- We must all continue to engage with children, young people and families to gather, listen and respond to what they are saying is working well and not so well for them. This includes using existing sources of children, young people and families' views.

- The workforce survey that we have developed provides a means of understanding the extent to which practitioners, leaders and services are working together to meet the needs of children, young people and families. In sharing our approach, we have provided the opportunity for the survey to be used in different settings and in the future to assess change over time.

Conclusion and next steps

Through the workforce survey, focus groups and interviews, we heard from over 1,400 members of the children's services workforce across all local authority areas in Scotland. We found a passionate, highly committed workforce that is working extremely hard to build supportive relationships with Scotland's children, young people and families to meet their needs but that it is a workforce which faces many challenges in being able to do their best to improve outcomes for the people they work with. When combining the number of responses with the depth of insights

shared, we believe this provides a robust evidence base on which to consider and assess Scotland's children's services landscape at the national level from the perspective of the workforce.

This analysis of the workforce's perspectives and experiences of Scotland's children's services landscape is the last strand in a series of four, collectively known as the Children's Services Reform Research study. This research and findings from the previous three strands of our research study (Anderson et al., 2023; McTier et al., 2023b; Porter et al., 2023) build a picture of what matters to, and what it takes to improve outcomes for, children, young people and their families. The evidence presented across the four strands of the Children's Services Reform Research study contributes to an understanding that there is a complicated eco-system of factors that all have an impact on the design, delivery and outcomes of children's services. Improving outcomes therefore requires more than a change in organisational structures. Where the integration of services is intended to assist in improving outcomes, this is a complex and nuanced process, with many factors and functions that can facilitate or impede achievement of this aim.

The findings presented in this report will contribute to Scotland's developing understanding of health and social care integration and the impact of this on services and outcomes for children and families. This analysis will be considered alongside the findings from the other three strands of the study and all will be brought together for the final research report, due to be published towards the end of 2023.

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