

**Aspirations and Actions**  
**Early Childhood from Policy to Practice in Scotland**  
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**Abstract**

This paper explores early childhood experience in Scotland in terms of how readily the aspirations of policy convert to day-to-day practices. Ambitions to improve the lives of children and families have been high on the political agenda. Policy may be understood as a tool that aims to influence childhood experience in positive ways. If this is to be so, then the processes that effect change and their limitations need to be understood better, as do the underpinning values and assumptions. The workforce is at the heart of the endeavour to put policy aspirations into action: they are considered to be agents of change: in exploring such issues this paper draws on a policy based functional analysis of the children's workforce (Dunlop, Seagraves, Henderson et al, 2011) and on policy developments since. The paper therefore discusses Scottish policy aspirations for young children and their families, the contribution of the workforce to achieving those aspirations and asks if staff competence in itself is sufficient to ensure policy delivery for all in a climate where child poverty continues to contribute to unequal lives.

**Key words**

Aspirations, policy, early childhood, poverty, Scotland

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**Introduction**

In setting out to discuss Scottish policy aspirations for young children and their families, the contribution of the workforce to achieving those aspirations and to ask if staff competence in itself is sufficient to ensure policy delivery in a climate where child poverty continues to contribute to unequal lives, it is important to begin with the policy context and climate.

***The Scottish Government Context***

Scotland's history is singular. The Union of the Crowns of Scotland and England came about in 1603 some 104 years before the Union of the Scottish and English Parliaments in 1707 brought about the dissolution of the Scottish Parliament: thereafter all legislation affecting Scotland passed through the British Parliament but the Scottish judicial system and its education system remained distinctive. Now the Scottish Parliament [<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/visitandlearn/25488.aspx>]<sup>i</sup> has control of a wide range of domestic Scottish policy including health and education as shown in Table 1 (*italicised*). In terms of currently reserved matters Scotland seeks to have control of, at least, benefits and social security and matters affecting employment in order to pursue social change.

***Childhood Experience in Scotland today- the need for positive change***

The latest available figures (SG, 2014a)<sup>ii</sup> tell us that while the estimated rate of poverty increased for all groups in 2012/13, the largest increase is in the rate of child poverty. Three measures are used: relative child poverty (BHC - before housing costs), relative child poverty (AHC - after housing costs) and absolute poverty (combined low income and material deprivation). Relative child poverty (BHC) increased to 19 per cent in 2012/13: of all children living in poverty 59% lived in households where at least one adult was working. The percentage of children in absolute poverty (BHC) in

2012/13 was 20 per cent, looking at absolute poverty (AHC), relative child poverty increased to 22 per cent. The Scottish Government’s Scotland Performs National Indicator 36 is to “reduce children’s deprivation”. While deprivation is relative and multi-dimensional (Townsend, 1987) it may be defined as when people are restricted in their *freedom to make choices* about what they want to be and do (Sen,1983): both concepts that have withstood time. Social justice for all children is high on the Scottish policy agenda, reducing deprivation is a priority.

At the time of writing debates continue about what additional powers may in fact be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. It is clear that there are some anomalies in the devolution of some social policy powers without others, leading to lack of local control of a number of social policy functions, including how benefits are determined and managed, which makes providing well for children and tackling child poverty an even greater challenge.

Table 1 – Scottish Parliament Devolved and Reserved powers

Devolved Matters	Reserved Matters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• agriculture, forestry and fisheries</li> <li>• <i>education and training</i></li> <li>• environment</li> <li>• <i>health and social services</i></li> <li>• housing</li> <li>• <i>law and order</i> (including the licensing of air weapons)</li> <li>• <i>local government</i></li> <li>• sport and the arts</li> <li>• tourism and economic development</li> <li>• many aspects of transport</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>benefits and social security</i></li> <li>• immigration</li> <li>• defence</li> <li>• foreign policy</li> <li>• <i>employment</i></li> <li>• broadcasting</li> <li>• trade and industry</li> <li>• nuclear energy, oil, coal, gas and electricity</li> <li>• consumer rights</li> <li>• data protection</li> <li>• the Constitution</li> </ul>

### Scottish Policy Aspirations

Scottish Government (SG 2007) defines its single purpose “to focus government and public services on creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish, through increasing economic sustainable growth”. Currently a set of seven purpose targets and five strategic objectives that underpin that purpose and describe an aspirational Scotland that is wealthier and fairer, smarter, healthier, safer and stronger and greener are in turn now supported by 16 national outcomes which describe in more detail what the government wants to achieve over a ten year period. Progress on these outcomes will be now be measured through 50 national indicators and targets (SG, 2015).

The current Government in Scotland has three pillars of social policy: ‘The Early Years Framework’, ‘Achieving our Potential’ and ‘Equally Well’ (SG, 2008 a,b,c). These policy frameworks are supported by a practice initiative, now enshrined in law through the Children and Young People Scotland Act 2014, called ‘Getting it right for every child’ (SG, 2012a), a single curriculum 3-18 with guidance on the youngest children addressed in the ‘Early Level 3-6’ (Scottish Executive, 2007) and in a separate set of guidance: ‘Pre-birth to three’ (Learning & Teaching Scotland, 2010).

### How is policy understood?

Press (2013) has discussed that policy is “the authoritative allocation of values”, with her co-authors (Bown, Sumsion & Press, 2009) she found that politicians play a key

role in influencing policy content and outcomes affecting the early years. In Scotland our politicians do play such key roles: while the process of consultation on draft policy and legislation is transparent, this brings about policy-by-consent, which in turn may risk acceptance of policy without sufficient challenge. We need to understand policy not just as the written down, but the process of formulation, text and implementation. Policy is about what is not acted upon as well as what is.

Policy processes may be understood as a system of discursive power, but according to Foucault (1991) they are also systems of discursive practices. It is clear that in Scottish, as in other UK policy, the needs, rights, care, learning and education of children are embedded in a complex adult discourse. What is less clear is who exerts influence on policy, why some early childhood discourses are favoured over others and who is listened to: what is majoritarian and what is excluded in policy formation? When aspirations are drawn out from policy, it is important to consider how these aspirations and the policies themselves reflect culturally dominant assumptions and discourses. The views of those excluded from the majoritarian discourse are always disempowered and marginalised. Thus, according to Deleuze and Guattari (2004), they become 'minoritarian'. In terms of social policy the groups that most risk exclusion from the discourse are the groups policy is most intended to help.

When policy is considered as discourse, knowledge and power become intertwined, in Jones's review of knowledge-to-policy literature (2009) he uses evidence to make the case for understanding policy processes and cites Sutton (1999) who suggests that "policy narratives" (p.15) are "stories of change": this seems particularly pertinent in the Scottish context where there is a strong policy narrative in relation to early childhood using terms such as 'getting it right', 'best possible start in life', 'best place to grown up' to promote the importance of these earliest years for long term success. There is an opportunity for a knowledge-to-policy journey at all stages of policy making, Jones refers to Pollard and Court (2005) who conceive these stages as agenda-setting, formulation, implementation and evaluation.

Educational reform in Scotland has been marked by consultation (Hulme, Baumfield, Livingston and Menter, 2009), if the workforce are to be agents of change, how are educators positioned alongside innovation and change? If early childhood practitioners are to engage professionally with interpreting policy they must move to taking a critical view. Discourse around policy across the UK will be mediated by country context, discourse around policy will also be mediated by local government policy and by sector. There may be a common language across such boundaries, but this can hide deep differences: both consultation on and challenge of policy as it is being shaped become essential. Such engagement is informative for policy-makers who seek to understand a given challenge and can help the articulation of that challenge and determine which policy ideas they are likely to include and promote (Campbell 2002).

In Scotland there are now many policy documents affecting children, childhood, families and professionals. With a surge of documentation comes the need to know how different policies relate to each other, how they may overlap and whether they have an influence in resolving the issue for which they were designed. Moving from the aspirations of policy to how policy is enacted is one of the most challenging matters facing governments today. Concerned about how to ensure that the competences of staff were equal to meeting the aspirations of policy, Scottish Government tendered for a 'Policy-based functional analysis of the Children's Workforce'.

The task specified was to examine key policy aspirations that the government has for children, young people and their families, to interrogate policy papers systematically, to synthesise the important policies in terms of the aspiration within each for children, young people and their families and to offer a definition of the Children's Workforce in Scotland, its functions and consequently the skills required for the workforce to meet the identified aspirations. From this the research team was to use their own findings, and feedback from officials, to produce a "functional map" setting out the main purpose and key functions and sub-functions of the workforce.

### **Scottish Policy Aspirations for children, young people and their families**

The policy based functional analysis of the Children's Workforce (Dunlop et al, 2011) was undertaken over a 9-month period. The Scottish Government's Workforce and Capacity Issues Division of the Children and Young People Social Care Directorate commissioned the project and were supported by an expert working group which they had drawn together. Following a public launch of the report the expert working group was to consider findings and how to build from this to determine core functions for the Children's Workforce. The emerging 'Common Core' (Scottish Government, 2012b) would become a policy-linked benchmark for workforce standards.

### ***Approach to the Task***

The project required the analysis and interpretation of a large quantity of policy information, spanning the sectors of education, health, justice and social services, amongst others. Guidance was given by the Workforce and Capacity Issues Division on the key documents to be included in the analysis: 56 policy documents were identified. A small number of further documents were identified and included at the discretion of the research team: initially the three 'building blocks' or pillars of Scottish Government Policy were analysed: *Early Years Framework* (Parts I and II, SG, 2008a); *Achieving Our Potential: A Framework to tackle poverty and income inequality in Scotland* (SG, 2008b), *Equally Well: Report of the Ministerial Task Force on Health Inequalities* (SG, 2008c) and *Equally Well Implementation Plan* (SG, 2008d); in order to generate a set of themes and codes through which to interpret the policy documentation.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

A conceptual framework emerged from the initial analysis of these three key documents. The overarching themes of policy aspirations, underlying principles and values of policies, as well as defining the relevant workforce, their functions and the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes they are required to possess were identified from the key research questions. An iterative process of continually reflecting on the research questions and analysis of the key documents enabled researchers to identify sub-themes contained within aspirations, principles and values, functions and competencies (Table 2). Each of these elements became a theme in NVivo (QSR, 2010) which carried its own set of codes. These codes expanded as further elements emerged from reading and scrutiny of policy: these are elaborated in the full report (Dunlop, Seagraves, Henderson et al, 2011). These elements align closely to the key research questions asked which were derived from the project brief and are reflected in the four key questions informing the present paper:

1. what are the aspirations of Scottish Government for young children and their families and how are these expressed in policy?
2. what policy elements are associated with a high quality children's workforce?

3. which staff competences can be identified as contributing to successful policy implementation?
4. given a focus on staff competence is this sufficient to ensure the central aspirations for children are achieved in practice?

**Table 2 - Aspiration sub themes**

Sub themes	Criteria guiding analysis of documents
<i>Economically active</i>	Would include transferable skills required to improve employability prospects and positive destinations for school leavers
<i>Healthy and Active</i>	Would include physical and mental health targets for individuals (children, parents, mothers-to-be)
<i>Lifelong, successful learners</i>	Would include quantitative and qualitative goals for learning and achievement
<i>Quality family relationships</i>	Would include aspects of parenting, nurturing, home environment, standards of living. Goals for children, parents and parents-to-be
<i>Secure local environment</i>	Would include ambitions for community regeneration, safety (crime reduction), accessible and affordable services (e.g. healthcare, schooling), more pleasant surroundings (more play facilities), decreased drug use.
<i>Resilient empowered citizens*</i>	Would include ambitions for greater community independence, social renewal, self-efficacy
<i>Inclusive Scotland</i>	Would include aspirations for participation.
<i>Respected - participates in society*</i>	Able to be active in society; respected citizens
<i>Confident, well-adjusted individuals*</i>	Able to lead happy lives
<i>Creative individuals</i>	Opportunity to express themselves creatively
<i>Access to services as needed</i>	Able to access services
<i>Children</i>	Would include aspirations for children only
<i>Parents</i>	Would include aspirations for parents only
<i>Community</i>	Would include aspirations for community

(\*In later analysis merged into one category)

### **1. The aspirations of Scottish Government for young children and their families and how these are expressed in policy**

Aspiration is a strong theme in Scottish Government policy documents. The analysis of policy documentation led to the identification of dominant themes that reflect this aspirational agenda for children, young people and families. The themes emerging from the analysis align, unsurprisingly, with the Scottish Government National Outcomes and also with the Girfec Wellbeing Indicators. In the initial analysis 11 main aspirations were identified, additionally, nodes were established for aspirations that related specifically to children, specifically to parents and specifically to communities, but no further analysis was undertaken in relation to these categories. The sub-themes for coding purposes and subsequent analysis are shown in Table 2.

The number of nodes (themes) that each document was coded at in NVivo, suggest how widely or narrowly policy documents dealt with issues. 160 nodes or sub-themes were identified in all, with the 'Getting it right for every child' (Girfec) documents coded at 159 of these nodes i.e. Girfec covers all aspects of policy that affect the Children's Workforce. On the other hand, for example, 'Gender equality duty' was only coded at 7 nodes, which indicates it deals less with the children's workforce and

on a narrow range of issues. The further analysis gives an indication of the emphasis given within each policy document to any particular theme but 20 references in a 25 page document is denser than 20 references in a 150 page document, so the length and focus of documents were taken into account. In terms of coverage of the identified themes (nodes) Girfec documents and the Standard for Childhood Practice (QAA Scotland, 2007), are the most densely coded documents. This supports the strong focus in Scottish Government policy on “a workforce that can deliver”.

Traditionally professions have been viewed less in relation to each other and more for their particular expertise. Expectations have been based on such expertise: that is upon those things that the professions are specifically educated for and trained to do. It is in the best interests of children that separate professions are able to relate to each other’s roles, values, knowledge and skills: in this way specialisms and specialist expertise may be recognised but not isolated from an overall professional endeavour to provide well for children, young people and families in what are often referred to as ‘universal services’.

Specific professional knowledge such as the screening functions of Health professionals (GP, health visitors, dentists, Local Area Coordinators) and the mediating and support roles of social work are highlighted in policy documents. In Education however Curriculum for Excellence, whilst promoting the professionalism of the teacher, is focused on what education and educators should aspire to and prescribes the purposes of education and the kind of people children should become because of it: aspirations that reach well beyond curriculum itself.

The policy based functional analysis of the children’s workforce showed that there is a clear aspiration running through all Scottish policy to ensure all children’s wellbeing and improve outcomes in order to tackle the unequal childhoods that lead to unequal lives. Many policies aim to protect children and improve their experiences.

Children and young people need to be understood in the context of family and community. The view of children and young people held by the workforce therefore needs to be holistic but personalised. The Children’s Workforce carries a particular responsibility for both the present wellbeing of children and young people and their future success and has a role to develop shared values and attitudes. In considering the functions of the workforce, as analysed through who the workforce is, what they do and why they do it, a number of *essential characteristics emerged* – these are accompanied by certain key knowledge and understanding that is needed in the Children’s Workforce, and the skills to enact that knowledge whilst holding a well developed set of values and principles. These themes are pervasive: they provide a thread of similar aspirations across the Scottish Policy Frameworks: today there is an increasingly strong focus on social justice.

## **2. What policy elements are associated with a high quality children’s workforce?**

All the policy documents were analysed in terms of the contribution they make to defining what is needed from a high quality children’s workforce. The policy based functional analysis of the Children’s Workforce had considered aspirations, values, knowledge and skills and the gaps that exist between policy aspiration and the current development of those who work or enable work with children, young people and their families. This process led to the identification of ten elements needed by the Children’s Workforce if they are to meet Government aspiration to ensure all

children's wellbeing and improve their outcomes, and may also be understood as competences (see below).

At present in Scotland as shown in this paper, policy aspiration is high. Linking those aspirations to action means applying knowledge and aspiration in practice. The nation-wide tools at the disposal of the workforce are the three policy pillars, the Children's Scotland Act and Guidance, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Girfec, the Early Years Collaborative (EYC), Curriculum for Excellence (Early Level and Pre-birth to Three). In education considerable guidance is available through the Education Scotland portal, in Health NHS Education<sup>iii</sup>, in Social Care registration, inspection and support is offered by the Care Inspectorate<sup>iv</sup> both separately and in conjunction with Education Scotland.

### **3) Which staff competences can be identified as contributing to successful policy implementation?**

The common message across many of the policy documents analysed is that professionals working with children, young people and their families need to:

- see beyond the boundaries of their own profession;
- put the best interests of children first;
- take account of the child's whole context, and
- share information about children and families within and between services efficiently and effectively when required.

It is the role, or function, of the workforce in Scotland to meet each of the ambitions specified in Government statements of purpose and outcomes. Analysis of the Children's Workforce had to begin with a definition: in Scotland the Children's Workforce is defined as all those whose work affects the lives of children, their families and the communities in which they live. The Children's Workforce in Scotland can be understood to be multi-layered and multi-skilled. This model of a multi-layered workforce has emerged from the analysis of occupational standards, registration benchmarks and the wide range of existing services: the four layers are identified are described in the full report. These layers of practice exist in each branch of services for children and young people and families. The application in this paper is to the early childhood workforce, as part of this wider workforce. These elements may be understood as competences: what the workforce needs to do in order to fulfill its roles or functions:

- Commit to a holistic view of the child
- Work inclusively with children and families
- Plan, assess, reflect, and implement strategically
- Work in partnership with other agencies
- Share information ethically
- Promote and support children's learning and development
- Ensure children's physical, emotional and social well-being
- Identify risks, prevent injury and weigh benefit
- Protect children and young people
- Build capacity

The knowledge, skills, values and attitudes linked to these characteristics lend themselves to mapping a core set of roles for the Children's Workforce in Scotland

and led to the creation of a Functional Map of the Children's Workforce in which each of the competences listed was elaborated in terms of what the workforce needed to do. Informed by the Policy-based Functional Analysis presented here, the Expert Working Group went on to develop a widely circulated consultation draft and questionnaire seeking views on the Common Core of skills, knowledge and understanding and values. The consultation was judged to have allowed consensus to emerge on a Common Core which shows essential characteristics for the workforce based on four principles of the UNCRC (non-discrimination, best interests of the child, right to life, survival and development and respect for the views of the child) and relying on two key sets of relationships: relationships with children, young people and families, and relationships between workers.

These guidelines and approaches form the basis of a strategic approach to early childhood in Scotland. The emphasis is on children's rights - policy is positive and declares that every child has the right to become a successful learner, confident individual, effective contributor and responsible citizen – wherever their learning is taking place. The dominant aspiration is to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up in by improving outcomes, and reducing inequalities, for all babies, children, mothers, fathers and families across Scotland to ensure that all children have the best start in life and are ready to succeed: only in this way will we narrow the gap in outcomes but actually change the curve. Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC) is a key policy instrument for fighting inequalities.

### **What is the practical provision and context for linking aspiration and action?**

Policy is the given – in Scotland many believe we have excellent policy in place to serve young children, but developing policy is only a beginning: the greater challenge is to put it into action. First we need continuous discussion about those aspirations, next we need to know what tools are at our disposal, then we need to learn to use those tools and to contextualize them to the children and families and colleagues with whom we work and finally we need to ask if systems, leadership, qualifications and support for the workforce are fit for purpose. We must look at the range of processes adopted to effect policy: at the present time in Scotland the leading practice approaches that together contribute to change are the Early Years Framework, Girfec, Pre-birth-to-Three, Curriculum for Excellence Early Level, The Early Years Collaborative, Building the Ambition guidelines supporting The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act, and raising the qualifications and registration of practitioners in the early years. Effecting change through policy and associated guidance calls us to look at the contribution of each identified tool in turn.

### **The Early Years Framework**

The first and arguably the most important document in the toolbox is the Early Years Framework which set out the aspiration of Government in 2008. At intervals since we have considered the progress so far in terms of these principles -

- we want all to have the same outcomes and the same opportunities;
- we identify those at risk of not achieving those outcomes and take steps to prevent that risk materialising;
- where the risk has materialised, we take effective action;
- we work to help parents, families and communities to develop their own solutions, using accessible, high quality public services as required.

These principles were then elaborated into a vision of 'transformational change': ten elements summed up Government aspiration for change: "a coherent approach;



helping children, families and communities to secure outcomes for themselves; breaking cycles of poverty, inequality and poor outcomes in and through early years; a focus on engagement and empowerment of children, families and communities; using the strength of universal services to deliver prevention and early intervention; putting quality at the heart of service delivery; services that meet the needs of children and families; improving outcomes and children's quality of life through play; simplifying and streamlining delivery and more effective collaboration".

(page 4, The Early Years Framework, 2008a)

The Early Years Framework heralded a fundamental shift in philosophy and approach that embraces the role of parents and communities and supports them with engaging in high quality services that meet their needs. Such change has implications for early years professionals and their practice: "Children and families are supported by a workforce which is highly skilled, well trained, appropriately rewarded, well supported, highly valued by all and with attractive career paths" (page 13).

### **GIRFEC**

The Girfec(SG, 2008e) programme was launched in the same year and provides the framework within which all services in Scotland deliver a child-centred, effective response to children and young people. Girfec has been developing over time: the driving idea behind Girfec is that everyone should work together to ensure that each child has the best start in life. The policy based functional analysis (Dunlop et al, 2011) found that Girfec, of all documentation interrogated, most reflected the aspirations of Scottish Government policy affecting the Childhood Workforce identified. Girfec particularly highlights the importance of understanding children's lives in context. The 'my world triangle' is a device to support this understanding and visibly draws from Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, transactional theory, and Erikson's notions of basic trust and mistrust. The importance of childhood experience in terms of subsequent the lifecourse is emphasized and networks of support are essential.

### **Pre-birth to Three**

Pre-birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families, replaces Birth to Three: Supporting our Youngest Children. The national guidance and multimedia resource, was revised by Education Scotland in collaboration with key partners to support and inform practice across Scotland. It links clearly to Early Years Framework, Curriculum for Excellence and Building the Ambition. It uses current research and practical case studies to facilitate improved evidence-based practice among staff and students. The key tenets are the rights of the child, responsive care, relationships and respect.

### **Curriculum for Excellence Early Level**

A key benefit of Curriculum for Excellence is that its early level now spans the pre-school and early primary stage meaning potentially children experience greater continuity in their learning. The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) framework is less detailed and prescriptive than previous curriculum advice in Scotland. It provides professional space for teachers and other staff to use in order to meet the varied needs of all children and young people. There is a strong emphasis on the health and wellbeing of children and on connections across different learning areas and beyond the classroom. Assessment is understood as an integral part of learning and teaching. Described as 'experiences and outcomes' there is a focus on the attributes and capabilities of the four capacities highlighted in CfE: these are that children have the

opportunity to be and become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

### **Early Years Collaborative**

The objective of the Early Years Collaborative (EYC) is to accelerate the conversion of the high level principles set out in Girfec and the Early Years Framework into practical action. Accordingly it is stated that the Early Years Collaborative must:

- Deliver tangible improvement in outcomes and reduce inequalities for Scotland's vulnerable children.
- Put Scotland squarely on course to shifting the balance of public services towards early intervention and prevention by 2016.
- Sustain this change to 2018 and beyond.

At the launch of the Early Years Collaborative (EYC) the Minister for Children announced what she referred to as 'stretch aims' – the aims were stated in terms of what early childhood services across health, education, social care and third sector needed to achieve for children, but the outcomes were expressed entirely in terms of children achieving certain milestones. "The Early Years Collaborative is a coalition of Community Planning Partners – including social services, health, education, police and third sector professionals - committed to ensuring that every baby, child, mother, father and family in Scotland has access to the best supports available. It's the world's first national multi-agency quality improvement programme." (SG, 2014b) Discussed as a very promising methodology for ensuring a shared vision for babies and young children, it is a reflective, peer led system for continual improvement in public services aimed at young families, based on a plan-do-study-act cycle (SG, 2014b). Key changes are early support for pregnancy and beyond, a focus on attachment and child development, continuity of care in transitions, re-establishment of the 27-30 month review, developing parents' skills, family engagement to support learning and addressing child poverty. The early years change fund is set at £272 million – turning the focus from treating problems to funding solutions.

### **The Child Poverty Strategy**

Another important policy tool is The Child Poverty Strategy for Scotland (2014c), Our Approach 2014-2017 (p.15). This strategy focuses on maximising financial resources of families on low incomes, improved life chances of children in poverty and that children from low income households live in well-designed, sustainable places. The aims are that children from low income households have improving levels of physical and mental health; experience social inclusion and display social competence; have improving relative levels of educational attainment, achieving their full potential, live in high quality, sustainable housing, grow up in places that are socially sustainable, grow up in places that are physically and economically sustainable. The aims of the Child Poverty Strategy should link to action to provide childcare both to support parental employment and education, to address health inequalities, to link to the Early Years Collaborative and Change Fund and to National Parenting Strategy.

### **The Children and Young People's Act**

A main thrust of the Act is to ensure that children's rights properly influence the design and delivery of policies and services. In creating the Children & Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, the Scottish Government has tried to strengthen the rights of children and young people in Scotland by encouraging Scottish Ministers and Public Bodies to think about these rights and how they relate to their work. It has also

created new systems to support children and young people and to help identify any problems at an early stage, rather than waiting until a child or young person reaches crisis point.

In terms of the youngest children, key elements of legislation are to increase the amount and flexibility of free Early Learning and Childcare from 475 to a minimum of 600 hours per year for 3 and 4 year olds, and 15% of Scotland's most vulnerable 2 year olds: from August 2015 this will extend to 27% of the most vulnerable 2 year olds. Free School Lunches will be provided to all children in primary 1–3 by January 2015;

The Act also enshrines elements of the *Getting it Right for Every Child (Girfec)* approach in law, ensuring there is a single planning approach for children who need additional support from services, providing a single point of contact for every child and providing a holistic understanding of wellbeing, creates new duties in relation to the UNCRC and increases the powers of Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People.

**Building the Ambition** (SG, 2014d) acts as national practice guidance to support staff in providing high quality early learning and childcare following the passing of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014. It “provides support for putting theory into practice by offering case studies and reflective questions to provoke discussion and to help support improvement”: in this document two key terms are introduced: *Practitioner* to mean all staff and adults who work with children under 5 years of age until they start school and *Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC)* to encompass all previous terminology related to pre-school provision and early education.

### **Early Learning and Childcare provision**

In Scotland 96.1% of three to four year olds receive some free early education, far fewer under threes benefit from state funded provision. Policy promises new development in funded places for ‘vulnerable two year olds’, childcare costs are second only to the south of England (Naumann, McLean, Koslowski, Tisdall & Lloyd, 2013) on much lower family income. Local autonomy allows for local focus, for example in Glasgow there is an innovative policy to work preventively by focusing on the needs of ‘just coping’ families. Goals for increased hours for childcare and early learning have risen and the Scottish Government states “The Scottish Government is committed to improving and increasing high quality, flexible early learning and childcare which is accessible and affordable for all children and families, and matches the best in Europe”.

The number of hours of free early learning and childcare for children aged three and four increased from 12.5 to almost 16 hours a week from the start of August 2014. The Scottish Government plans to extend this entitlement to 2 year olds who will qualify in the same way as they would for free school lunches from August 2015: eligibility is based on birthdate, having a parent or carer in receipt of one of a number of identified income-based benefits or being in care out of the parental home. These changes are set out as entitlements for the child, the challenge for providers lies in how to increase the number of places, extend the hours, sustain quality of provision and manage flexibility to meet both child and family needs. Ambitions to provide 600 hours of universal preschool provision means increased staffing demand, flexible

provision and awareness of parental wishes. How then is this to be achieved? Questioning how readily the aspirations of policy convert to day-to-day practices leads to the final question:

**4) Given a focus on staff competence is this sufficient to ensure the central aspirations for children are achieved in practice?**

If exploring the discourse of policy development, its informing ideas, values and positions taken, allows us to understand process, then interrogating the consequent, and many, written policies to understand the overall and combined aspirations of policy, may help to bridge the policy-implementation gap. By shining a light on policies affecting early childhood, the rhetoric of policy can surface: this in turn allows the potential to understand the effectiveness of systems, the role of the family, the models held of children, the role of community networks, the resources needed and to consider the primary resource that is the workforce: what do they need to know, value and do to enact the particular policy aspirations defined?

***Raising the qualifications of staff and development of registration standards of practitioners in the early years***

The main thrusts of current workforce development policy are to raise the qualifications of early childhood managers to degree level with a leadership qualification included, practitioners to have at least a Scottish Level 9 qualification, and to have qualified teachers with an additional specialised expertise in early childhood. Practitioners in public sector employment or working in partnership settings are expected to seek registration with SSSC and therefore to either be qualified or in training.

Where private nurseries are not in partnership with Local Authorities they are not registered to provide this universal provision and children of parents needing to use such settings are disadvantaged in cost terms. Registered childminders are an underestimated section of the workforce that is well used to flexibility: it will be interesting to see how their role could potentially change for families who choose to opt in to the free 600 hours offer. As hours of entitlement increase for children, the numbers of qualified teachers in early years settings is diminishing: they are the bridging professional across early years and primary education and across the shared Early Level 3-6 Curriculum.

Currently an Independent Review of the Early Learning and Childcare (ELCC) Workforce and Out of School Care Workforce is underway and due to report in April 2015. To achieve the increased hours and flexibility entitlement announced for young children will mean a huge expansion of the workforce. As the political momentum for expanding early learning and childcare strengthens we must continue to focus on quality, and this mean focusing on the workforce – accessibility is not enough, and so in Scotland we now need a new quality debate to ‘shift the curve’ in children’s outcomes to more lasting change.

While policy does indicate the kinds of competences staff may need in order to make a difference for children, the evidence is scant and research in Scotland does not yet look at the impact of these improved qualifications on the experiences and outcomes of children, and benefits to childhood experience. Three reports have attempted to consider this relationship (HMIe, 2007; Education Scotland, 2012; Davis, Bell & Pearce, 2014) and each makes clear the ways in which staff practices have benefited, environments for learning have changed, “qualifications have enabled a new professional grouping to emerge in early years, childcare and related services that

work to improve outcomes for children between birth and 16 years of age” (Davis et al, 2014, page 6), but child data itself is absent. Scotland has invested heavily in such qualifications but we do not yet have evidence in Scotland of the difference qualifications make to outcomes for children and families and in what ways, whereas we do have evidence of an ongoing inequality of outcome for too many of our children.

### **In conclusion**

This paper set out to consider four questions focusing on aspirations of Scottish Government for young children and their families and how are these expressed in policy; on the policy elements associated with a high quality children’s workforce; on the staff competences that can be identified as contributing to successful policy implementation, and given a focus on staff competence to ask if is this sufficient to ensure the central aspirations for children are achieved in practice.

The policy based functional analysis of the children’s workforce shows that there is a clear aspiration running through all Scottish policy to ensure all children’s wellbeing and improve outcomes in order to tackle the unequal childhoods that lead to unequal lives. ‘Getting it right for every child’ emerged as the lead document linking policy direction to practice. It is well evidenced through the emphasis on outcomes that pervades policy documents that a long term policy view needs to be adopted both locally and nationally in the best interests of Scottish society as a whole, and in particular in the best interests of our children and young people.

There is a continuing need for the main sectors and many professional groups, whilst maintaining their distinctiveness, to know more about each other’s contributions so that together their contribution is coherent, collaborative and anticipatory. The process of identifying core functions, for the whole Children’s Workforce, reminds us that children, families and communities are different. Whilst all have a right of access to services, and a reasonable expectation that what is offered should be of high quality, policy aspiration does not indicate the sufficiency of core skills, but rather a foundation of core skills, a set of common shared functions.

Our systems are complex, with many people and a range of qualifications and contributions involved at different levels, the commitment of all the practitioners that populate the early learning and care workforce is not in doubt, but we remain reliant on change in the adult – a key agent, change in the system, robust policy and now need to generate the evidence of change for the child, for children and for childhood. We must hope that Scottish Policy for Children and Families is fit for purpose, that there are ways to make Scottish Policy Aspiration a reality and that we have an informed and agentic workforce that values young children, supports wellbeing in early childhood, remains devoted to the task of improving lives and is supported by other agents of change such as Government, Local Authority, Education Scotland, identified by Sosu & Ellis (2014).

But we can do more than hope – early childhood practitioners and early childhood advocates have a duty to be aware of “how policy is played out in their communities, and collectively build the alliances and knowledge bases that allow them to locate that knowledge in a broader social and political context and thus develop policy responses and initiatives that provide leverage for social justice.” (Press & Skattebol, 2007, p 189)

This is the continuing ‘aspiration to action’ challenge for Scotland.

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<sup>i</sup> The first session of the Scottish Parliament was held in May 1999 and following the Scottish Parliamentary election in 2007, all policy business was conducted under the name Scottish Government, rather than Scottish Executive as before.

<sup>ii</sup> Scottish Government will be referenced as SG throughout the paper.

<sup>iii</sup> [<http://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/>]

<sup>iv</sup> [<http://www.scswis.com/>]