

Child protection briefing

25 February 2016

Introduction

Social work as well as the wider social care workforce has a fundamental role in protecting Scotland's children. This responsibility is shared with other key public services, communities and families. Social workers have a robust, evidence-based, understanding of the range of factors that affect children and their families and collectively Social Work Scotland has the professional practice wisdom and the line of sight to the most vulnerable children in Scotland.

Public services in Scotland have significantly improved practice and procedure for the statutory elements of child protection which keep children safe. But to continue to improve and to prevent much of the harm we see from happening in the first place, we need to focus more on neglect.

We believe there is now an opportunity to widen the focus of our policy and practice to better address neglect and to tackle the underlying issues which can increase the risk of child abuse: poverty, inequality, the impact of alcohol, drugs, mental illness, violence and domestic abuse on children's lives.

This focus in no way diminishes our responsibility to promote effective practice and intervention around child sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse or child sexual exploitation. Nor is this approach a panacea to tackle all types of harm to children. Neglect however should be of equal priority for the Scottish Government.

Focussing on child neglect as an approach to combat child harm is consistent with Scottish Government policy: it would further promote the aspirations of Getting it Right for Every Child, the aspirations of the Early Years Task Force, and the Scottish Government's desire to realign children's services and deliver early and effective intervention.

Child protection practice sits within a spectrum of early intervention, effective family support and the protection of every child. Fundamentally child protection is an integral part of Getting it Right for Every Child. Child protection should be visible within early intervention and named persons responsibilities because it is a prerequisite to achieving children's and young people's well-being indicators through the implementation of the child's plan.

In making changes in this policy area we must recognise the level of challenge that remains. There are no easy answers, but a focus on neglect will help protect the right children at the right time.

1. A national approach to child wellbeing and neglect routed in prevention and early intervention

Action required now:

- The Early Years Task Force must include a focus on neglect and the underlying causes of child abuse: poverty, inequality, substance misuse, mental illness, violence and domestic abuse.
- Child protection policy and planning must sit within the context of Getting it Right for Every Child.
- Child protection must be included in the performance management frameworks of public bodies who have a role in children's lives, in particular, Integrated Joint Boards and Community Planning Partnerships
- Greater flexibility is necessary in utilising the resource for vulnerable two year olds in pre-school and with respect to the additional funding around health visiting. Facilitating robust and effective investment around early support and engagement with vulnerable families is critical.
- Child protection and prevention must be of the highest priority for national and local government and receive attention similar to that given to delayed discharge.

2. A national approach to supporting frontline staff, to enable and facilitate learning across Scottish public services; ensuring effective learning around significant case reviews, evidence informed practice and accessible research.

A strength of social work is that its effectiveness is based on building trusting relationships and supporting people to turn their own lives around. Learning is key in child protection. This is also the most challenging aspect of practice where the emphasis has perhaps wrongly shifted to a culture of defensive practice through bureaucratically driven processes.

Social work practice, within the context of child protection and neglect is based on strong evidence of what we know works and what we know doesn't work. In order to improve and keep learning and offer the best support to children and their families we need to promote research and provide practitioners with continuous access to evidence.

Action required now:

- A first class Scottish centre for excellence for child protection which includes a focus on neglect.
- Implementing the research and findings of Professor Eileen Munro of the London School of Economics
- A programme of learning and teaching for child protection social workers including dedicated CPD time similar to the 'in service days' prevalent within education.
- Access to good quality and effective supervision that allows professionals to become experienced and expert in relationship based work particularly with hostile and challenging families.

- We can transfer the learning and approach utilised in relation to permanency and the PACE programme and apply that to child protection and neglect. For example there is a direct link between the work of Professor Eileen Munro and the work of Professor Brigid Daniel at Stirling University on resilience and research on the Neglect Observatory.

3. Governance

Action required now:

- A sharper focus from child protection committees on two priorities identified in this paper: a focus on neglect; and support to staff.
- The model of Significant Case Reviews need national agreement and consolidation around best practice.
- In continuing to focus on the learning of frontline staff and in identifying the preconditions for effective implementation of the learning from Significant Case Reviews, the child protection committees can become more effective in delivering learning outcomes and improving practice.
- Child Protection Committees must hold responsibility to ensure there is effective accountability, an appropriate feedback loop, continuous evaluation of impact and the sharing of national best practice.
- We need to support leadership development across the public and third sector that focuses on empowerment and strength based approaches linked to evidence.
- Revised guidance that reflects the important role Child Protection Committees play in providing leadership, assurance, accountability and promoting a culture of learning. The important role that the publication of significant case reviews play in providing learning and promoting improvement.
- We need to ensure we do not lose the link between adult and child protection and a government stance which was around public protection would be very useful and included cross generations services such as Alcohol and Drug Partnerships would support this.

4. Resources

The reduction in budgets to local authorities and third sector providers impacts on the ability of services to carry out child protection functions. If the protection of vulnerable children is a priority this has to be addressed.

Action required now:

- We need a package of resources to allow us to address the issues of neglect we have described. We need flexibility in universal programmes and projects to allow more focus on children at risk of neglect.
- Greater investment in research on child neglect and social work practice coupled with investment in making that evidence accessible to social workers.

Summary

As we embark on the national inquiry into historic child abuse and as we learn about the circumstances of those children who continue to suffer serious injury or indeed death, we need to make sure we do everything in our power to prevent further tragedies and learn from those that do occur. A stronger focus on neglect will help us do that by focussing on earlier support to children and families.

Providing reassurance on the protection of children remains challenging. There has been significant cultural change within our communities towards the physical chastisement of children demonstrating that changing behaviours and attitudes is possible when key messages are clear and support made available. We can and must do better with respect to neglect and other forms of abuse towards children and young people.

We need to support the social work profession to learn and prosper and build relationships which will help children and their families; we need to continue to move from a culture of compliance and blame to one of performance and learning.

We do not need more legislation on child protection, we have the legislation we need. What we do need is a shift of focus on to neglect and a commitment to further support social workers to do the work we need them to do.

Contact information

Jane Devine | 07901 772233 | www.socialworkscotland.org | @socworkscot