

In light of the Scottish Government's development of Early Years policy, new governance and funding regimes, and recurring debate around parenting, this briefing sets out the key actions that CHILDREN 1ST believes are needed if vulnerable children and their families are to have better outcomes.

Key points

- Strengthen universal supports for parents and carers in every community, including universal health visitor provision
- Design services to meet the needs of the most vulnerable families in Scotland, with long-term, all-age, flexible, proactive and needs-based support
- As a follow-on to the Early Years framework, the Government and COSLA should consider services for parents of children aged 9-18 years.
- Review best practice around emotional and social support for parents, and strengthen ParentLine Scotland
- Continue prioritising policy to end child poverty by 2020, including working with Westminster to urge an increase in child benefit to meaningful levels, and increasing the provision of high quality and affordable childcare in Scotland

Strengthen universal supports for families

CHILDREN 1ST believes that it is time for Scotland to adopt a policy of making support easily available to all families in order to enhance child wellbeing, prevent problems from arising, and link families experiencing difficulties more easily into targeted services. Furthermore, we note the considerable number of kinship carers in Scotland who deserve and would greatly benefit from accessing the range of universal supports that all families need.

In practice, this means firstly strengthening, not reducing, universal health visitor provision. Health visitors are a non-stigmatising, expert service who can directly provide emotional and practical support to parents and carers. They are also very effective in helping ease access to more targeted services as required. Recent policy has seen health visitors' universal role devalued and restricted, but to do so means reduced support for Scotland's most vulnerable children. We urge the Government to strengthen the health visitor role as a key element of supporting parents and carers in the Early Years.

We also urge the Scottish Government and local authorities to ensure that there is a range of parenting advice and education, parent/carer support groups, and accessible, affordable and good quality leisure and development opportunities for all children available in every community in Scotland.

Services designed around those who need them most

Many services available to families in Scotland are inflexible, stigmatising and do not suit our most vulnerable families. We welcome the developments around 'Getting It Right For Every Child' and encourage the Government to continue to resource and direct these developments. In addition, the Early Years framework, and other policy related to vulnerable families such as the alcohol plan and Drugs Strategy, need to plan provision of:

- Long-term services that build relationships with families - this means commitments to longer-term funding and planning of provision. This also means services designed to address family needs throughout childhood, not limited to one age group or one type of need.
- Services that go out to families, rather than waiting for families to come to them.
- Services that listen to what families want and are designed accordingly.
- Seamless, holistic service provision.

Supporting parents of teenage children

CHILDREN 1ST fully recognises the importance of getting support right in a child's early years as this clearly has profound knock-on effects on the rest of their life. However, no matter how much support parents are given in the early days, parents and children still need support at different times and in relation to different issues throughout childhood. Parents of teenagers experience pressures such as dealing with difficult or offending behaviour, issues around boundaries and family relationships, and concerns around drugs and alcohol, to mention a few, as well as having to deal with many of the pressures experienced by all parents no matter the age of their child.

There is very little support available to parents of teenagers, whilst at the same time they are on the frontline of addressing many of the big issues facing Scotland, such as youth offending, teenage sexual health and substance misuse. These parents need somewhere to turn for advice, for parenting information and for emotional and social support. As a follow-on to the current Early Years work, the Government and COSLA should bring stakeholders together to consider provision of support specifically to parents of older-age children.

Tackle the causes and symptoms of poverty

The underlying cause of many of the problems facing vulnerable children is poverty. We welcome the Scottish Government's recent discussion paper on tackling poverty and encourage them to continue to work towards ending child poverty by 2020. Progress toward this target should be monitored and reviewed regularly.

We urge the Government to alleviate one of the symptoms of poverty which is the negative impact upon parental wellbeing, such as increased likelihood of mental health problems. We know from CHILDREN 1ST's experience and from research

that a parent's emotional, physical and mental wellbeing have a huge impact upon the resilience and wellbeing of their child(ren), such as a lack of protection, not being fed or clothed properly, physical abuse, a lack of care from parents, or being bullied at school¹.

Calls to ParentLine Scotland show us that there are many parents in Scotland who are experiencing stress and difficulty in their role. Often this is because of issues such as difficulties related to family relationships, external pressures such as childcare, or dealing with a child's behaviour², exacerbated by coping with parenting in poverty.

Having someone to talk to for encouragement and emotional support, and to be able to 'offload', is vitally important for parent's mental and emotional health. CHILDREN 1ST recommends that the Scottish Government review best practice models around providing support such as mentoring provision, and consider how to increase support available during times of transition and stress. ParentLine Scotland, as a universal, easily accessible source of help and information for all families, should be strengthened.

Tackling poverty means that benefit levels for families need to be addressed. We call on the Scottish Government to work with Westminster to urge an increase in child benefit to a meaningful level. In particular, given the significantly higher likelihood of poverty in larger families, child benefit should be available at equal levels for all children. Contrary to current Westminster proposals, lone parents should be able to choose the best care for their child, and provision of affordable, high quality childcare must be significantly increased before any penalties should be enforced on single parents who care for their child full-time.

For more information about this briefing, contact Mhairi Snowden on Tel: 0131 446 2393 or at mhairi.snowden@children1st.org.uk for more information.

CHILDREN 1ST works with particularly vulnerable children and their families through our 40 local and five national services, including ParentLine Scotland, the free and confidential national helpline for parents and carers, and managing ChildLine in Scotland on behalf of the NSPCC. For more information about our work, including policy work, see www.children1st.org.uk

CHILDREN 1ST is the working name of the Royal Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Registered office: 83 Whitehouse Loan, Edinburgh, EH9 1AT. Registered Scottish Charity Number SC016092

¹ CRFR and ChildLine Scotland (2005) Children's concerns about the health and wellbeing of parents and significant others

² ParentLine Scotland (2007) 'Why being a parent isn't easy'