

Cross Party Group on Children and Young People

Tuesday 3rd May 2022 15:30 – 17:00

Minute

Pandemic Impact Survey – Follow up meeting with Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills

Chair: Meghan Gallacher MSP

Present

MSPs

Meghan Gallacher MSP

Kaukab Stewart, MSP

Invited guests

Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills Shirley-Anne Somerville, Scottish Government

Chris Roberts, Scottish Government

Bryony Revell, Scottish Government

Non-MSP Group Members

Aimee Thorpe, Children in Scotland

Caitlin Mooney, Skills Development Scotland

Chris Ross, Children in Scotland

Clare Simpson, Parenting Across Scotland

Dana, Children in Scotland

David Ashford

Finlay Allmond, Magic Breakfast

Gabrielle Blackburn, Scottish Women's Aid

Gemma Richardson, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

Glen Reynolds, Aberdeenshire Council

Helen Forrest, Children's Health Scotland

Jane Brumpton, Early Years Scotland

Jessalyn Mahony

Joan Mowat, University of Strathclyde

Kelly Munro, Carers Trust Scotland

Kerry Reilly, YMCA Scotland

Kirsten Shield Salvesen Mindroom

Laura Campbell, The Spark

Lizz Curley, Children in Scotland

Lorna Kettles, Early Years Scotland

Lyndsay Fraser, Robertson, Children in Scotland

Lynne Gilmour, Stirling University

Meg Thomas, Includem

Megan Moffart, Who Cares?

Salena Begley MBE, Family Fund

Sarah McMillan, Scottish Association of Social Work
Sarah Paterson, YouthLink Scotland
Sharon Fairley, Scottish PNA
Time Frew, YouthLink Scotland
Toni Groundwater, Families Outside
Tracey Thompson, Early Years Scotland
Vonnie Sandlan, Children 1st

Welcome from chair

Meghan Gallacher MSP welcomed the members of the CPG to the third meeting of the new parliamentary term. Meghan told members that the meeting would focus on following up on the CPG's recent report on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. She shared that we would be joined by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley Ann Somerville, who was keen to follow up with the group to hear the concerns of members.

She stated that the meeting would include a quick recap on the findings of the report and attendees would also hear updates from several members of CPG on the ongoing impact the pandemic continues to have on children, young people and families they work with to illustrate the report. Members would also have an opportunity to highlight issues during an open discussion with the Cabinet Secretary.

Lastly, she added that there would be time for the group to discuss further action we wish to take over the coming months to ensure the sector has the support that it needs.

Meghan ran through a range of housekeeping measures and reminded all attendees that the chat function was available for questions and comments.

CPG Business

a. Minutes

Meghan said that the secretariat had shared the previous minutes with members of the group. No issues had been raised in relation to the minutes. She asked members to confirm if they were happy to take these minutes as read.

This was approved by the membership and the minutes were ratified.

b. Actions

Meghan handed over to Chris Ross, Children in Scotland to provide an update on the actions from our last meeting.

Actions from last meeting

- *Chris Ross, Children in Scotland, said that the CPG has continued to reach out to new organisations that have recently got involved in the group to explore taking out membership of the group. This work will continue to diversify the membership.*
- *The Convenors and Secretariat have shared the report with key stakeholders and on the back of that work, Cabinet Secretary for Skills and Education joined today on the back of that work.*

Pandemic Survey

Meghan handed over to Sarah Paterson from YouthLink Scotland who provided a summary of the pandemic report produced by the CPG on Children and Young People.

Pandemic Survey: <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/6981/final-cpg-pandemic-report.pdf>

Updates on remaining barriers

Meghan introduced members of the CPG and invited them to present on the continued challenges the families they support continue to face since the publication of the report in February 2022.

She introduced the speakers and reminded them they had 3 minutes each.

- c. Early years - Early Years Scotland – Lorna Kettles, Policy Officer
- d. Youth work – YouthLink Scotland – Tim Frew, Chief Executive Officer
- e. Care experience – Who Cares? Scotland – Megan Moffat, Policy Officer
- f. Families – Parenting Across Scotland, Clare Simpson, Manager

Brief background for each organisation:

Early Years Scotland: Early Years Scotland is committed to providing the very best start in life for every child in Scotland. They are the leading national third sector organisation for children pre-birth to 5.

Early Years Scotland's remit is broad, but with a strong focus on the professionals and families who care for the youngest members of our community.

You can find out more, here: <https://earlyyearsscotland.org/>

Lorna Kettles discussed:

- Financial insecurity and mental health: Lorna said that the organisation has seen the families they support experience extreme financial hardship due to

job loss and the cost-of-living crisis. The lack of uplift is breaking families and Early Years Scotland is seeing increased mental health issues.

- Relationships: Early Years Scotland have seen a breaking of bonds between practitioners and families. While digital tools have been a help, not being able to deliver face to face services has weakened relationships.
- Funding: While Early Years Scotland received funding in the early days of the pandemic to provide resources for families, this funding has since been pulled back while the challenges facing families remain.
- Impact on children: Early Years Scotland has seen children showing a delayed development in their socialisation and speech and language skills. Families have expressed concerns about delays in these areas and the organisation has created new services to support language and socialisation.

YouthLink Scotland: YouthLink Scotland is the national agency for youth work. We're a membership organisation representing more than 100 youth organisation members across Scotland, both voluntary and statutory.

YouthLink Scotland champion the value of the youth work sector, challenging government at national and local levels to invest in your development.

You can find out more, here: <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/>

Tim Frew discussed:

- Access to facilities: Lack of access to facilities remains a massive concern. While this has improved with the lifting of restrictions, there is still a huge variability in access across the country. Specific challenges highlighted include: after school building access not available, worsening communication/relationship with schools, lack of transport to some facilities, and the need for additional cleaning for building. Together, these factors have resulted in worsening services for young people.
- Volunteer numbers: Volunteer numbers have sharply fallen, and organisations are struggling to recruit previous and new volunteers.
- Transitions: Transitions between primary and secondary education have been disrupted and this has negatively impacted young people.
- Participation: The Scottish Government and organisations need to keep listening to young people. The Lockdown Lowdown tracked young people's experiences over the lockdown period, but this is no longer taking place. Tim expressed concerns that we're not capturing the harms facing young people, in particular BME children and young people, LGBT+ children and young people, and children and young people in poverty are likely seeing increased difficulty and we need to make sure that we are capturing that data.
- Calls to Action: YouthLink Scotland is calling on the Scottish Government to increased recognition of the importance of youth work, and calling on the government to create a plan, with resources and a budget, to get volunteers back.

WhoCares Scotland: Who Cares? Scotland is a national voluntary organisation, working with care experienced young people and care leavers across Scotland.

Who Cares? Scotland supports care experienced people to have their voice heard and we make that happen in a number of ways.

You can find out more, here: <https://www.whocarescotland.org/>

Megan Moffat discussed:

- **Worsened inequalities:** Who Cares? Scotland have found that many older care-experienced young people experienced – and continue to experience - a high degree of poverty during COVID.
- **Lack of Engagement with those with care-experience:** the policies created in reaction to the pandemic overlooked children in care and those in institutions. The Scottish Government acted without taking into consideration their duties under the Promise, UNCRC and Children and young people act. This needs to change.
- **Actions:** Who Cares? Scotland called on the Scottish Government to commit to protecting care-experienced young people and consider introducing a Universal Basic Income Pilot for care-experienced young people, like the initiative taking place in Wales. [Click here to read more about Basic Income Pilot for Care Leavers in Wales](#)
- **Mental health challenges:** Who Cares? Scotland have also seen increased need for mental health services among care-experienced young people, which they explore more in their recent [Tend Our Light report](#). They called on the government to improve access to mental health services, making it more flexible and giving young people more choice in the kind of care they receive.

Parenting Across Scotland: Parenting across Scotland is a partnership of charities which offers support to children and families in Scotland. They work together to focus on parenting issues and to help realise their vision:

‘A Scotland where all parents and families are valued and supported to give children the best possible start in life.’

You can find out more, here: <https://www.parentingacrossscotland.org/>

Clare Simpson discussed:

- **Early Years:** Parenting Across Scotland expressed concern about the developmental delays around speech and language they are seeing in the young children they support.
- **Mental Health:** The organisation has seen increased parental and child mental health difficulties. Children are suffering from a lack of socialisation.
- **New Parents:** Parents who have given birth over lockdown have not had the forms of support they normally have.

- **Poverty:** The cost-of-living crisis is having a massive impact on parents. Parents have been hit by the benefits cut, the pandemic, and now the cost-of-living crisis; families are struggling to pay their bills.
- **Digital exclusion:** While there has been a huge push to get laptops and equipment to families, however, many still don't have enough devices, which are essential for both school and work.
- **Work:** For many families, work is insecure and the closure of services over COVID meant that many parents had to forgo work to care for their children, increasing their financial difficulties.
- **Under 25s –** young families receive less funding than families with parents over 25 and this needs to change.

Meghan thanked the speakers.

Response from Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley Ann Somerville -16:05 – 16:15

Meghan invited Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Shirley Ann Somerville to respond to the survey and to the contributions.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills thanked the speakers and responded to their statements. She discussed:

- **The importance of youth work:** she described how the Scottish Government has widened the Scottish Attainment challenge to focus on poverty and is supporting schools to form links with external services, like youth work. The Scottish Government have allocated £2 million in funding for youth work and will be publishing a new youth work strategy later in 2022.
- **Early Years:** She said that the Scottish Government will focus on the importance of socialisation, speech and language and make sure services can respond. The Scottish Government have made a commitment to increase early years funding.
- **Transitions between primary and secondary school:** she said that the Scottish Government is working on a package of support for the summer, particularly for families who are on a low-income.
- **Participation of children and young people:** she said that Scottish Government are working on a strategy to embed children and young people's views across a number of policy areas.
- **Inequalities:** She said that the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and significant work needs to be done for Scotland to meet its UNCRC duty. She highlighted children with a parent in prison and disabled children and young people as being particularly negatively affected.

Response from Membership

Meghan opened the floor to questions and responses from the CPG membership.

Questions:

1. Vonnie asked: Are the Scottish Government doing something about the coming increase in fuel cap in October? The Children 1st Parent-line has noticed an increase in numbers of parents and carers seeking their support in the last month. Parental wellbeing and financial insecurity have been the main reason for contact.
2. Meg asked: How do we improve relationships between pupils and teachers? How do we skill up our teachers and give them the time to build relationships? We produced a report after the second school closure about the impact on the children and young people we support. We are working with Education Scotland to realise some of the recommendations. Click here to read [The School Experience of Young People Pre & During Covid-19](#) report
3. Tim said: the youth work sector is very keen to be part of that discussion on youth voice with other agencies and to support that discussion with those at the margins.
4. Laura said: We deliver in school counselling across a number of authorities. We find that often Local Authorities will run procurements and commissioning to find one service for all schools in the area, which reduced choice of services. One service is not enough for an area with the amount of need we're seeing, and schools need more choice. We need to build a framework that give schools more freedom work best.
5. Salena said: I would like to reiterate concerns about the ability of families with disabled children to recover financially. The decline in income that families with disabled children and young people on a low income have experienced have occurred on the back of many already experiencing declining income levels pre-pandemic-in 2019 1/3 of families (36%) saw income fall. In March 2022, our Family Fund's quarterly Family Poll found:
 - a. 81% of respondents in Scotland indicated that their family's overall current financial situation was worse compared with before the Coronavirus pandemic
 - b. A third (33%) indicated that their family's overall financial situation was much worse than before the pandemic.
 - c. 26% of respondents indicated that in the last 12 months they, or another adult in the household had had to use a foodbank, as there was not enough money for food
 - d. 48% of respondents indicated that in the last 12months they, or another adult in the household had had to cut the size of meals or skip meals, as there was not enough money for food
6. Meg said: There is a particular challenge for children and young people who are formally or informally excluded from schools. What is being done to

reduce/end school exclusion and what is being put in place to ensure children's right to education when mainstream school is not working for them?

Responses from the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills:

The issue of pupil mental health is very important. The Scottish Government is aware that while improving attainment is a priority, it is also essential to look at mental health, wellbeing and relationships. We need to make sure children's needs are met first. We've tried to empower head teachers to have more flexibility, and this is something that local authorities should look at, it is worth bringing the debate to COSLA.

The summer support is really important and provides a safe space for children and young people to access services. We are continuing to try to support organisations on this.

Meghan thanked the Cabinet Secretary for her contribution to the meeting and said that we would follow up with her office to discuss ongoing work.

Summary from CPG Convenors

Meghan summarised the discussion stating that she found it to be a very thought-provoking session and thanked the speakers for sharing their experiences.

She commented that her main takeaways from the day were the incredible importance of early learning and family support, and the need to ensure youth work facilities are accessible across the country.

Commenting on the Cabinet Secretaries responses, she acknowledged that more work would need to be done across parties to support families who are facing financial difficulties and that participating MSPs today will have the opportunity to continue taking part in this work and scrutinising the work the Scottish Government is undertaking.

CPG discussion of next steps

Members of the CPG were put into breakout rooms to have the opportunity to discuss how the CPG should follow up with the Cabinet Secretary and identify other engagement opportunities to support recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Close

Attendees were thanked for attending the meeting and informed a future date has not been set.