



**scottish universities
insight institute**

mobilising knowledge for a better Scotland

Scottish Universities Insight Institute

Summary Report

**Changing the narrative: reframing our responses
to the developmental needs of looked after
children and those who care for them**

November 2017 – September 2018

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Despite concerted attempts to improve outcomes for looked after children, evidence indicates that proportionately they have greater need and poorer outcomes than their non-looked after peers: similar to other countries, they encounter multiple placement moves; partial assessment of need; poorer educational outcomes; greater mental ill-health and variable degrees of support on leaving care. In addition, there is often a 'disconnect' between research-evidence and practice and a lack of congruence about how 'need' is identified and addressed across disciplines and geographical areas.
- 1.2 By bringing together academics, policy-makers and professionals from diverse disciplines, this programme sought to kick-start a national conversation about the contribution that a child developmental approach could make to improve how we address the needs of looked after children, their families and those who care for them. As well as providing an opportunity to contribute to the existing Independent Care Review, which will report directly to the First Minister, the programme sought to challenge participants to look afresh at familiar concepts and then deploy their experience to wrestle with the implications for policy and practice.
- 1.3 To achieve this aim, the objectives of the programme were:
- To bring together a range of stakeholders to consider current best-evidence on the antecedents and impact of childhood developmental trauma.
 - To provide a reflective space where diverse stakeholders can share knowledge and explore implications for themselves and how they work with others.
 - To ensure that the experiences of children, families and carers inform knowledge-exchange and influence future ways of working.
 - To develop communities of practice that can be supported to take forward ideas sparked by the programme.
- 1.4 It was proposed that by the end of the programme, participants should have:
- A clearer understanding of the research and its implications for policy and practice.
 - A greater understanding of how an integrated approach works for individual children and those who care for them.
 - A renewed drive for better integrated working in the networks around the child.

2. 'Starting a conversation'

- 2.1 Given that one of the key aims of the programme was about 'starting a conversation', it is worth noting that the programme team was keen that knowledge-exchange should be actively promoted not only during the events themselves, but also in-between events for participants and to a wider audience for non-participants. Various techniques were used to meet these requirements which were broadly well-received by participants:
- We decided that we would hold three linked events over a 5 month period, where each event built on the learning from the previous one. We therefore encouraged participants to commit to attending all three events to ensure there was some

continuity across the programme and that knowledge and knowledge-exchange was built and deepened over time. We recognised that this method did exclude some people from the conversation, but felt that building relationships over-time reflected something of the developmental approach we were advocating for children & young people and parents & carers.

- Recognising that this 'ask' of participants would be difficult for some professionals to meet over time, we organised to hold the first event on two consecutive days to ensure maximum exposure of our international speakers and to reach a broad volume of staff and thus ensure participant numbers were viable across all three stages.
- We produced materials from each event that were posted on the Scottish Universities Insights Institute (SUII) web-page so that if participants were unable to attend a particular stage, they could catch-up on learning at their own pace.
- We also posted reading and viewing materials on the web-page before and in-between events to expand people's knowledge and thinking.
- To widen 'the conversation' even further and to embed people's learning into their professional environments /networks, participants were asked, in-between stages, to discuss the learning with non-participating colleagues so that learning was spread to a wider audience. Prompt questions were provided to get the conversation going with colleagues / peers.

2.2 Due to the desire to bring together a wide-range of disciplines and voices and to reach differing levels within organisations, as well as achieve a geographical spread, we decided to target invites to key people who brought a wealth of experience on some aspect of the subject matter and / or who held key positions within their organisations as decision-makers / influencers / budget-holders. To a large extent this method worked and enabled an experienced group of people to come together. However, we found that some very senior professionals and policy makers delegated the invite to other staff which meant that there was a reduced number of very senior decision-makers and influencers in attendance.

2.3 It was very unfortunate that the programme was severely disrupted by industrial action in February 2018 which led to the need to re-schedule dates for most of the Stage 2 and the 3 events. Not only did this disrupt the continuity of 'the conversation' but prevented some people from attending: in particular, it disproportionately affected our 'learning-connected' colleagues whose diaries allow for less flexibility at short notice. The Stage 2 session that specifically focused around 'learning, creativity & play' had to be absorbed into one of the other sessions due to low numbers for the revised date.

3. Structure of the programme and its outputs

3.1 As mentioned above, the programme entitled '*Changing the narrative: reframing our responses to the developmental needs of looked after children and those who care for them*' took place over 3 distinct but connected stages. Drawing on the theme of integration (the linkage of differentiated parts), space was given within the schedule to allow disciplines to learn together, to separate and then link again:

- **Stage 1** looked at the evidence and concepts connected to a child developmental frame. This event was run twice over two consecutive days.
- **Stage 2** saw people meet in smaller groups under 3 keys themes
- **Stage 3** brought people back together as one group to draw on the learning from previous sessions and look at what change is possible in their own environments.

3.2 To look at each of these stages in more detail, **Stage 1** was about looking at child developmental from different perspectives. Taking place at Celtic Park in November 2017, the programme included:

- A keynote presentation from Eamon McCrory, Professor of Developmental Neurobiology & Psychopathology at the Developmental Risk & Resilience Unit, University College, London who on spoke about [*Childhood maltreatment, latent vulnerability and the shift to preventative help: Understanding the link between childhood maltreatment and long-term mental health risk*](#)
- A keynote presentation from Michael Tarren-Sweeney, Professor of Child and Family Psychology, Canterbury University, New Zealand who spoke on [*Developmental Child Welfare: Using developmental knowledge and theory to reform child welfare and alternative care systems*](#)
- A presentation from Mary Berrill, HM Inspector (Senior Education Officer, Inclusion) Education Scotland, who looked at [*An underpinning Framework: How schools assess, plan, implement and review support for looked after children*](#)
- A presentation from Gordon Main & Lorraine Sillars on behalf of CELCIS and Partners that focused, in two parts, on [*Messages from children, young people and those who care for them*](#)
- A presentation from Laura Steckley, Senior Lecturer, Social Work, University of Strathclyde and Ruth Emond, Senior Lecturer, Social Work, University of Stirling who looked at [*Holding onto the Big and the Small: A Developmental Orientation in the Everyday*](#)

3.3 All of the presentations were followed by Q&As and each of the presenters took part in a 5-10 minute video which focused on the key messages from their inputs. These can be found [here](#) on the SU11 website:

3.4 Across the two days 208 people participated in the Stage 1 events, representing 85 organisations. Broadly speaking, the feedback received was overwhelmingly positive with the presentations by Professors Eamon McCrory & Michael Tarren-Sweeney getting particular mention. From a developmental perspective, audience members paid particular attention to concepts / information on:

- Understanding children's behaviour as adaptive rather than problematic or part of their characters.
- The concept of 'latent vulnerability' and how the impact of trauma can be mitigated.
- The importance of helping children with 'felt security' so that they have a deep sense of belonging and being claimed.
- The need to urgently address 'in-built impermanence' in care systems.
- Understanding behaviour as communication.

- The need to address fragmentation by seeing the whole child within their family, social and wider community settings, and seeing their strengths and capabilities as well as what is causing them distress.
- Appreciating the joy of the everyday, and how nurturing, attuned relationships are the foundations upon which children grow, heal and flourish.

3.5 Seeking to build on the learning from the Stage 1 events, Stage 2 saw the group separate into 3 themed groups. Taking place at Strathclyde University, 95 participated in these sessions, which focused on:

- Stable Care – a developmental dialogue (February 2018)
- How an organising frame of child development will ensure the best standards of health care for looked after children (April 2018)
- Changing the narrative: resources and structures (April 2018)

Many participants welcomed the chance to contribute in smaller discussion groups, in particular, the space to think more deeply about some of the ideas that were raised at Stage 1 and how these apply to practice in the here and now. Each of the sessions produced an overview of the discussions which can found [here](#)

3.6 Despite the time delays and interruptions along the way, **Stage 3**, which took place at the Glasgow Concert Halls in September 2018, saw 66 participants gather for the final time to reflect on the learning to-date and to identify shared understandings across disciplinary boundaries, how these could help service delivery to be more aligned and what gets in the way of improved integration? In addition, participants were asked to focus on what practice or services work well at different levels of children’s lives and how a more developmentally-oriented approach could be introduced at these various levels. Of significance, this final session sought to hear thoughts and analysis from care-experienced young adults and to make a direct connection with the Independent Care Review. The following documents from the day can be accessed [here](#)

- The agenda
- Notes from the morning discussion
- Notes from the professional panel
- Notes from the young people’s panel, write-up of the young people’s session and feedback from the day can be found here:

3.7 Participant feedback from the day was, again, overwhelmingly positive. Of note, people particularly commented on the energy and positivity in the room and the sense of collaboration, trust and humour that people brought. They liked the structure of the day and the fact that earlier sessions were built on and acted as a good catalyst for discussion. Many noted the high standard and mix of the speakers, with particular attention given to hearing the reflections of care-experience young adults and the input of Fiona Duncan & John Carnochan from the Independent Care Review. Further, what many people found useful was the space to reflect, to listen and share ideas across professional boundaries and to consider their own roles within the system in the context of a child-developmental frame.

4. Impact of the programme

- 4.1 Participants at Stage 3 were asked to spend some time towards the end of the day to reflect on the process as a whole and what, if any, impact the programme has had on their thinking and knowledge with regards to the subject matter. The full results can be viewed [here](#). Recognising the limitations of such a short survey, the majority of respondents said that they enjoyed being part of the series of events: using a 5-point Likert scale, 44 people out of 46 returns rated it a 4 or 5, with the remaining 2 people rating it 3. When asked what 3 things they enjoyed most about participation, their responses can be loosely grouped under the following:
- Working collaboratively, listening & sharing ideas, exchanging ideas with professionals from different agencies, challenging and being challenged.
 - The opportunity to discuss and network with other agencies and disciplines and to make connections in approaches and understandings
 - The range of issues discussed, being better informed about current practice, linking of theory & practice, making connections with other agendas e.g. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).
 - Space to listen, think and reflect on their own and with others and the deeper understanding that this brought.
 - The positive tone of events and the sense of hope, optimism and the possibilities for change.
 - A real appreciation for hearing the perspectives of care-experienced young people and the fact that this was done in a safe, analytical way.
 - The standard of the speakers throughout the series and the use of Panel Discussions at Stage 2 & 3 to prompt dialogue and deeper levels of knowledge exchange.
- 4.2 When asked what they enjoyed least, many commented on the disruption within the programme which led to a loss of momentum whilst others said that they would have liked to have seen a clear plan to move things forward. In response to the latter suggestion, it was agreed in the closing programme team discussion that participants will be invited to take part in a virtual community of interest that would not only build on materials already produced in the series but would also capture examples of tangible practice that is 'developmental' in orientation. In addition, by making connections with the Independent Care Review, the programme has offered a way of taking learning forward at a national and strategic level and participants will also be provided with up-to-date information on the Review and how they can link with this process.
- 4.3 In an attempt to get a deeper understanding of the impact of the programme, participants were then asked the question 'In what ways, if any, has this series helped to develop your knowledge / thinking about re-framing our responses to the developmental needs of looked after children and those who care for them?' Again, responses have been loosely grouped as follows:
- As mentioned above, the input from care-experienced young people resonated with many participants and there were a number of comments that indicated that hearing this input means that they will have a greater focus and sensitivity towards

the experience of young people and carers going forward. The need to challenge stigma and to be mindful of 'language' was particularly highlighted.

- Participation has increased and/or enhanced their knowledge on child development as a frame for understanding need and shaping action. In particular, many noted the importance of 'relationships' at all levels as a key agent of change.
- Again, people spoke of the space for reflection and welcomed the opportunity to be exposed to new ideas.
- For some, the programme helped to re-affirm existing practice and reassured people that their practice was heading in the right direction.
- Some participants commented that they had already translated the knowledge gained into practice: examples given included it will fundamentally impact on the development of the organisation's school nursery programme, that it will be cascaded into work with foster / kinship carers and with practitioners and some of the materials have already been fed into training materials for work with schools.
- The multi-agency and multi-disciplinary nature of conversations was seen to add real value and demonstrate that the use of a child developmental frame is a means of building consensus across the sector around 'need' and 'areas for change'.

4.4 Notwithstanding the issues around disruption to the programme that was beyond the organisers' control, the vast majority of respondents (77%) found the format of building a conversation over time as useful. What was particularly heartening was, that despite working in a sector that has been affected by financial restraint, most people made time to engage with the materials that were provided before and in-between sessions on the SU11 webpage and said that this was a useful means of knowledge-exchange.

4.5 Participants were also asked if they had been able to take any of the learning / discussions from the series into conversations with colleagues / peers / work groups etc. who had not attended the events. Again, a high percentage of respondents (76%) had been able to do this to a greater or lesser extent. For many, this information was enthusiastically received with comments touching on the fact that the learning was appreciated, recognised as important and generated interest in the responses of other disciplines. For others, attempts to share learning were impeded by time, competing priorities, pressure from work-load and limited opportunities, although many said they would keep on trying.

4.6 Within the organisations that made up the programme team, there was a sense that profound learning had arisen overtime as a result of the various discussions that had taken place to shape events. This learning has been shared internally within organisations but also with wider partners. Concrete examples of impact include:

- Within CELCIS, concepts of 'felt security' and 'in-built impermanence' have provided a language and focus that has shaped a review of foster-care and residential-care practice with a local authority.
- CYCJ reported that these concepts and the conversations around them, also supported dialogue across the Secure Care Strategic Board and its work streams, particularly in relation to the development of draft national standards for secure care. The inclusion of senior practitioners, policy and decision makers responsible

for young people who experience being in and on the edges of secure care was seen as important as these young people and those who care for them are often marginalised.

- Although the 'Learning, creativity & play' session did not go ahead as planned, one of the planned SU11 inputs was delivered to 40 staff as part of the CELCIS Education Forum and the presentation slides have been shared on the Forum website which has a membership of 300.
- The organising committee of the annual SIRCC (residential child care) conference have chosen to build on the learning from this programme and shape the 2019 conference around what child developmental practice looks like in residential care.
- Within South Lanarkshire, the learning and themes have contributed to decisions around the use of Scottish Government Scottish Attainment Challenge / Care experienced funding.
- Also, the learning has influenced South Lanarkshire's Psychological Services to look at developing best practice protocols for Looked after Children moving school.
- In NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde the events were reported to be timely in that they have enabled a better, more informed discussion to take place about developing a complex trauma pathway in CAMHS and across Specialist Children's Services.