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Final Report: Getting it right for separated & unaccompanied children in Scotland

Main objectives and context

The programme aimed to provide the opportunity to explore the various ways unaccompanied minors are framed within policy and guidance, a framing that informs understanding and responses. In this context, the programme aimed to identify existing systems in place to support and work with separated children and the policy, practice, legal and conceptual frameworks around this. At this time in Scotland, when the country is looking to assert its own identity within the UK and Europe, the programme was particularly relevant in exploring how Scotland can provide a more welcoming and supportive environment for children on the move.

The main aims and objectives of the proposed programme were built around two key questions:

1. What are the conceptual, definitional and political issues that affect understanding of the needs and motivations of children on the move?
2. What national and international legislation, guidelines, knowledge and evidence underpins current responses and support for separated children?

Insights from the programme

Event 1

The presentations and small group discussions in the first touched on the experiences of children on the move, the importance of the international context and the responses to date in Scotland, together with concerns about the future. There was agreement that in the global context Scotland has had a relatively small number of unaccompanied children and, given the UK Government border policy, is unlikely to receive numbers approaching that of other European countries. Nevertheless there was concern from local authority representatives of the financial implications in relation to children and young people already here, and the potential for future arrivals under the National Transfer Scheme. Others considered the focus should be on the positive implications of children coming to Scotland and what they can share and contribute.

The stories of the young people and the foster carers at the event highlighted the importance of a compassionate and child focus approach that focused on the needs and experiences of the young people, not on the label of immigrant and 'problematisation' of the issues. There was some concern from local authorities about the limited experience in many areas, although the message was well received that applying a broadly GIRFEC (Scottish policy for working with children and young people) based approach to the work will demonstrate that local authorities and partner agencies largely have



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the appropriate skills and experience. However, there was also consensus of the challenges of the work, not least concerns around the age assessment process.

There was much debate at the first event in relation to a focus on the challenges and opportunities as a result of global migration, and whether an emphasis on the negative experiences and challenges of responding can lessen any attention on the good work commenced. For example the Scottish Guardianship Service was acknowledged by international speakers as having influenced other developments across Europe.

Event 2

Having set the broader national and international context in the first event the second looked at some of the positive work that has been undertaken in local authorities across Scotland and shared good practice experiences, while also addressing the challenges. Four local authorities from across Scotland described their work with separated children, some with substantial experience and relatively large numbers of young people, others with more recent arrivals of a small number of children and young people.

There is consensus that key to successful responding to the needs of young people has been collaboration and inter-agency working; this includes with neighbouring local authorities and services that most local authority workers may not have been engaged with previously. The contribution of the Scottish Guardianship Service was highlighted as being useful with their specific knowledge, but also with a recognition that until recently the service has largely been Glasgow based.

Maria Fotopoulou, University of Stirling, presented some of the emergent findings from a Carnegie funding scoping study looking at 'Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children in Scotland'. Maria explored how most recent UK guidance seems to 'problematise' separated children, presenting difficulties to existing child welfare provision, with accompanying responses framed in a very much deserving and undeserving framework. A short questionnaire was circulated to all Scottish local authorities as part of the study, seeking to briefly explore their experiences of working with unaccompanied asylum seeking children; half were returned. Local authorities were asked what guidance and good practice is consulted to inform their work and to facilitate effective interventions with separated children, as well the potential challenges and barriers to effective responses to the needs of children. In confirming some of the earlier discussions today Maria acknowledged that for the majority of local authorities in Scotland experience of working with separated children is limited. There is also some disparity in the guidance that each local authority is consulting, moving between Scottish specific welfare and legislative provision and UK wide documents.

Event 3

Event three aimed to explore some of the experiences of agencies in other European countries at opposite geographical locations. Greece as a country where many children and young people, and other asylum seekers, first arrive in Europe; and Norway where some of the children finish their journey and are looked after by local authorities in locations similar to the Scottish experience.

Tassos Smetopoulos, from STEPS an organisation working with street children provided an overview of the situation in Greece. His picture of the situation there put the Scottish situation into perspective,



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as at present there are over 3000 documented minors in Greece, and an unknown number of undocumented. While children are meant to stay in Safe Zones children are often stuck on the islands for months and there are severe delays in funding. However, while on a different scale, some of the problems described by Tassos regarding funding and service provision struck a chord with the Scottish audience. Tassos also acknowledged that the vulnerability of the children is extremely complex as some are involved in drug smuggling and child sexual exploitation.

Ragnhild Hollekim and Marte Fylkesnes, University of Bergen, shared their experiences of the Norwegian situation, a country similar in size to Scotland, but with 422 municipalities (local areas). The numbers of separated children in Norway far exceeds that of Scotland, with a record number of arrivals in 2015 of 5480 children, dropping dramatically in the following two years. Most often children are 15-17 years old, with most common countries of origin being Afghanistan, Eritrea and Syria. There was some discussion about the Vietnamese population, the most numerous country group in Scotland at the moment, but who do not feature in Greece or Norway. Norway has dispersed many of the children to rural communities with some success (and some challenges), a comparison with the planned National Transfer Scheme in Scotland.

The British Red Cross provided an overview of their services in the UK / Scotland for working with young people who generally are not linked in the Scottish Guardianship Service, or have an allocated social worker. The ethos of the service is to work with young people as they present, rather than seeking to find the 'truth' about their situation. Many, if not all, children present with complex histories and needs; approximately 15% of the young people are believed to have indicators of child trafficking.

Andy Sirel, JustRight Scotland, provided an overview of the age assessment debate and international context. As always this subject provided the basis for much debate; participants were surprised to hear that the UK is one of only three EU states who rely largely on non-medical assessment to establish age. There was much debate around the role of social workers undertaking age assessments in Scotland, not least because of the reservations expressed by international and national professional associations.

The series of professional input at the workshops was closed by Mirren Kelly, COSLA, who provided an overview of the present position in Scotland regarding the arrival of children and young people under arrangements facilitated through the COSLA migration partnership.

The final words were those of a young person who shared her thoughts and experiences on some of the challenges faced in her journey. This tremendously articulated and emotional end to the workshops provided a clear indication of the importance of getting it right for all children arriving in Scotland.

Main outcomes and (expected) impact

The series of workshops provided opportunity for a *“good combination of partners”* to share *“great resources”* and *“expertise in one room”*. Representatives from local authorities across Scotland were able to share their experiences and hear from some of the key agencies and professionals working



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with separated children. While there was an overall sense of the challenges, there was also a recognition that Scotland has an opportunity to provide a safe and welcoming environment for children and young people. Those professionals with limited experience were provided with a “*good opportunity to have an overview of what the issues are within local authorities*” and those with experience were able to link into some of the international experience.

The quality of the input and presentations was not in doubt – “*the most relevant and interesting session I have attended in a long time*”. “*... I have learnt so much from [the event], not only the content but from the others in the room sharing their experience*”. If the learning from the events can be taken away by participants and contacts maintained and developed the legacy of the events will be the impact on the future services provided to children and young people.

Key recommendations for end user / policy communities

- Foster cross country dialogue and contacts
- Continue to learn from the experiences of other countries
- Recognise the political and social context of the work
- Ensure there is ongoing evaluation of the work
- Listen to children and young people

Planned follow up activities

- ✚ The programme team members continue to work with each other in practice and / or research activities.
- ✚ More in depth summaries of all three events will be published as a final report, which will then be translated into an academic monologue.
- ✚ The findings from the workshops will form part of a series of articles for publication linked to other ongoing national research looking at the local authority response to separated children arriving in Scotland.
- ✚ The lead partners Paul Rigby and Daniela Sime are exploring opportunities for future funding collaborations linked to the SUII workshops and outcomes.