

Aberlour response to Scotland's Ten Year Strategy for the Learning Provision of Children and Young People with Complex Additional Support Needs 2017-2026 consultation

August 2017

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Introduction

As Scotland's largest, solely Scottish Children's charity, Aberlour believes every child deserves the chance to flourish. We provide services across Scotland for children and young people with complex additional support needs, and, therefore, we welcome this strategy and all attempts to ensure those children and young people have equity of opportunity to achieve in a way that meets their individual learning needs. We also support the Scottish Government's overarching ambition within the National Improvement Framework (NIF), to see ***"a Scotland in which all children and young people can realise their potential, regardless of their social background or learning needs, thereby developing the knowledge, skills and attributes they will need to flourish in life, learning and work."***¹ We believe that in order for children and young people with complex additional support needs to realise their potential there must be a 'whole child' approach to their learning provision. Any strategy which aims ***"to improve outcomes for children and young people with complex additional support needs...with a particular focus on the provision of education"***², must also recognise that each child or young person's wider care and support needs must be effectively planned and coordinated around their learning needs, particularly for those in mainstream education settings. We also believe in order for any strategy to effectively improve outcomes for children and young people with complex additional support needs, it must ensure that children, young people, as well as parents/carers, are at the centre of how decisions are made, and services and supports are planned, around their learning needs.

Working in over 40 locations across Scotland, we provide services which support vulnerable children, young people and families across a range of settings. These children, young people and families experience vulnerability and multiple challenges on a daily basis as a result of being in care, facing issues around dependency, being exposed to inequality and disadvantage, or having complex additional support needs and disabilities. The children and young people supported by our disability services have experience of a range of learning provision, with some attending mainstream schools, some attending alternative educational settings and others who are home-schooled. We find that the quality of children and young people's learning provision can often differ greatly depending on the individual school they attend or the area where they live.

¹ <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00491758.pdf>

² https://consult.scotland.gov.uk/support-and-wellbeing/complex-additional-support-needs-2017-2026/user_uploads/00518630-1.pdf

To inform our response to this consultation, we sought the views of parents/carers of children and young people supported by our disability services.

Section 1. Our Vision, Aim and Objectives

Section 1 provides information on the vision, aim and objectives of the strategy.

1. Is this structure correct? Does the content of the document flow in a logical order?

We believe the structure of the strategy is clear and flows in a logical order, and that the vision, aim, objectives, rationale, context, evidence base and required actions are all set out clearly.

2. Does the structure help the reader to follow the strategy effectively?

It is our opinion that whilst the structure is clear and logical, it is necessary to consider how accessible this strategy document is for children, young people and parents/carers. We believe it would be beneficial for the purpose of effectively communicating to children, young people and their parents/carers the strategy, its vision, aims and objectives, and how they will be achieved, that there should be accompanying accessible and easy-to-read versions of this strategy, including visual representations of the vision, aim, objectives and actions outlined therein. In addition, we believe it would also be beneficial to include an illustrative flow chart of how it is intended the strategy will progress, link to the National Improvement Framework (NIF) and wider education policy landscape, achieve its aim and objectives, and ultimately realise its vision. We feel the inclusion of visual representations will aid both the effective communication and a better understanding of the strategy, for practitioners, parents/carers, children and young people.

3. Do you think the aims of this Strategy and the four objectives are the right ones to achieve the Scottish Government's purpose of improving outcomes for children and young people with complex additional support needs through strategic commissioning of services?

We believe it is important that the strategy clearly links to the four priorities and six key drivers within the NIF, to ensure that there is as equitable a focus on the educational attainment and outcomes of children and young people with complex additional support needs, as there is with their peers. Whilst the aim and four objectives of this strategy are clearly linked to the NIF, we believe that the strategy's objectives should also provide a clear focus on ensuring each child or young person's wider care and support can be planned and coordinated effectively around their learning needs to support them to achieve and to realise their potential.

We recognise this is a strategy which aims to improve outcomes for children and young people with complex additional support needs, with a particular focus on education, however parents have highlighted concern around such a universal approach to achieving equity and excellence in education, expressing uncertainty as to how that ambition will be achieved in practice. Therefore, we believe that a programme of communication and direct engagement with parents/carers, as well as children and young people, should be planned to support the development and implementation of this strategy in order to address such uncertainties.

Section 2. Why we need Strategic Commissioning for Learners with Complex Additional Support Needs?

4. Within the context of The Doran Review recommendations – do you agree with the explanation of why we need Strategic Commissioning for national provision/services for learners with complex additional support needs?

We agree with the explanation of why strategic commissioning for national provision of services for learners with complex additional support needs is necessary, and support the approach as outlined within the strategy. However, whilst the rationale to this approach to national strategic commissioning as outlined is judicious, we do note that the commissioning process will continue to allow for local authorities “**acting within the national legislative and policy context**” to decide upon “**the most appropriate interventions and placement**” for any child or young person. Therefore, we believe any strategic national approach could be inhibited by an inconsistency of approach from one local authority to another, in relation to assessment of needs of any child or young person and decisions on through which intervention or placement their needs can best be met.

Parents have expressed they are broadly supportive of such a national approach, although concerns remain around how this approach will impact on the provision of services and availability of support locally, highlighting uncertainty in what way a national approach will ensure local needs are met. Some parents highlighted a desire that any national approach ensures services continue to be available and accessible locally, either through dedicated regional centres or through the provision of peripatetic services and supports that can regularly visit their area. Therefore, we reiterate our opinion that a programme of communication and direct engagement with parents/carers is required to accompany the strategy.

5. The ‘Scope of Services to be commissioned’ on page 8 relate to education, care and health, research and training and is informed by the Doran Review recommendations and the National Needs Analysis, which was completed in 2015. Can you please comment on any services within those headings which you would particularly wish to see featured here? Please tell us if you think it should exclude any aspects or include any others?

Education

It is our opinion that if the strategy aims to improve the educational outcomes of children and young people with complex additional support needs, then this should extend to the provision of early years’ services for pre-school children. The strategy is informed and guided by existing national education policy, chiefly Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), which requires the provision of “**a coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum from 3 to 18**”³. We note the absence of any reference to the provision of early years or pre-school provision for children with complex additional support needs within the strategy, and therefore further clarification of the scope of learning provision within the strategy, commensurate with the CfE, would be welcome.

Care

³ <https://www.education.gov.scot/Documents/btc3.pdf>

Parents have expressed that they feel the provision of care services is better in secondary schools than in primary schools. Many parents have highlighted that all schools attended by children or young people with complex additional support needs should have dedicated support available to meet any wider care needs, such as specialist nursing practitioners. A further consideration identified by parents is the need for additional practical and/or emotional support for parents/carers and extended family of children and young people with complex additional support needs, and how this can be provided through or coordinated in partnership with schools.

Training

We welcome the proposed development of relevant professional learning and development opportunities for teachers and practitioners who work with children and young people with complex additional support needs. We also recognise that specialist training and qualifications and the development of a key skill set is essential for teachers and practitioners. However, parents have highlighted that key aspects of training for all teachers must include challenging negative perceptions of children and young people with complex additional support needs in mainstream education, as well as training which aims to improve understanding and empathy towards parents/carers.

In addition, we feel the strategy provides an opportunity for developing a culture of partnership between commissioners and service providers, including shared training which can support and strengthen the commissioning of services within the scope of the strategy.

Section 3. 10 Year Strategy

This provides detail on the strategy for the first 10 years on the proposed approach to strategic commissioning of national provision/services for children and young people with complex additional support needs.

6. What are your views on the National Commissioning Groups proposal that the first phase of strategic commissioning will focus on pathfinder (testing) activity on training, development and research? Are there any particular areas of training which should be focussed on?

We agree with this approach.

7. For the purposes of this document the National Improvement Framework drivers have been adapted and therefore reflect particular concerns related to children with complex additional support needs? Do you have any suggestions for additions or alternative wording which should be included? Please set it out against the relevant heading below.

Parental Engagement

Parents have expressed a desire for greater opportunities to be involved in supporting the learning of their children. Some parents have highlighted a frustration at the lack of opportunities to assume leadership roles and responsibilities around their child's education, despite the recognition of the importance of a parent's role as an educator - ***"a child's first educators are their parents or carers. A large proportion of children's opportunities to learn are outside the classroom in the family setting***

where learning can, and does, take place.⁴ Therefore, we believe the strategy should acknowledge the role of parents as leaders in their child's learning, and reflect that not only in the wording but also within the overall approach to developing leadership within the strategy.

Assessment of Children's Progress

The strategy proposes it will ensure a personalised approach to assessments of progress in learning for children and young people with complex additional support needs, and "***will reflect collaborative contributions from all the key agencies***". We note the absence of engagement or collaboration with children and young people themselves, or their parents/carers. In addition, we believe it would be beneficial to make provision for which agency will lead or coordinate such assessments if multi-agency collaboration is required.

8. Do you agree that the Governance arrangements detailed on page 14 are appropriate? If not, what else should be included?

We believe the Governance arrangements should ensure a clearly defined role for parents/carers of children and young people with complex additional support needs.

General

9. In relation to the overall 10 Year Strategy - are there any areas missing, requiring strengthening, or which are not required and could be removed?

We welcome that the strategy has been developed within the framework of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and believe that, in accordance with Articles 12 and 23 of the UNCRC, the strategy should not only ensure that each child or young person's voice is heard, but also support their meaningful participation in decisions which are made around the learning needs⁵. As an organisation, a children's rights focus underpins all Aberlour's work, ensuring a personalised and participatory approach is at the centre of the work we do with all children and young people whom we support. Supporting and empowering children and young people to contribute their thoughts, opinions and ideas and to have their voice heard is a dedicated and well-practiced element of our personalised and children's rights focused model of care and support, which informs service development and delivery. We feel that this is an area of focus which could be further developed within the strategy, and in doing so support and guide organisations, service providers and practitioners in how such a participatory and personalised approach can inform practice. Therefore, it is our opinion that greater focus on direct engagement with children and young people themselves, through seeking views, opinions and supporting participation in developing and implementing the strategy, is required.

In addition, parents have expressed frustration in being able to successfully challenge decisions made, most often by local authorities, which they disagree with regarding their children's learning needs. Therefore, we believe the strategy must recognise the importance of and need for advocacy services

⁴ <http://www.enable.org.uk/includedinthemain/Pages/22-steps-on-the-journey-to-inclusion.aspx>

⁵ https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_united_nations_convention_on_the_rights_of_the_child.pdf

for children, young people and parents/carers, which can provide advice and support in such circumstances.

10. Are there any general comments you would wish to make about ‘Scotland’s Strategy for the Learning Provision for Children and Young People with Complex Additional Support Needs 2017-2026’?

We recognise that the strategy intends to link outcomes for the learning provision for children and young people with complex additional support needs to the NIF key priorities, including **“Improvement in employability skills and sustained, positive school leaver destinations for all young people.”**⁶ However, parents have expressed a desire to see a greater focus on employability for young people with complex additional support needs within the strategy. Often parents have found limited meaningful employability opportunities, as well as minimal planning for transitions into positive destinations, once their child’s education career has ended. Parents often feel they need to “sell” their children, lobbying on their behalf in order to access employability opportunities. It has been highlighted by those parents that looking towards dedicated local centres for supporting young people to develop employability skills, in partnership with local employers, should form part of the focus of the proposal **“action research will complement activity linked to research into transition and positive destinations and will reflect collaborative contributions from all the key agencies”** outlined within the strategy.

We believe the issues parents have highlighted around the limitations of planning and accessibility of employability opportunities for young people with complex additional support needs highlights a more fundamental concern. Societal attitudes towards those children and young people often mean that any contribution they can make, within their communities and throughout wider society, is not recognised or valued. Parents have expressed a need for this strategy to address this deficit in understanding that value and recognising young people’s ability to contribute, through focusing on their employability. Therefore, we feel it is relevant to consider how this strategy intends to help wider society recognise and appreciate the skills, qualities and talents of children and young people with complex additional support needs.

For any further information please contact Martin Canavan, Policy & Participation Officer Martin.Canavan@aberlour.org.uk

⁶ <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/12/9340/5>