



**Scottish Parliament Justice Committee -
Stage 1 Consideration of the Offensive Behaviour at Football
and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill**

General

Action for Children is one of the UK's largest children's charities, working with over 156,000 children, young people and their families at around 420 projects across the UK. In Scotland we work in partnership with local authorities and other agencies to run more than 60 services, which help almost 8,000 of the country's most vulnerable children and young people to fulfill their potential and to make the most of their lives. This includes looked after and accommodated children and young people, young carers, children affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse, young people with disabilities and young people who offend or at risk of offending. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Scottish Parliament's Justice Committee for its Stage 1 consideration of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill. Action for Children Scotland's evidence draws upon our experience of working with some of the most difficult to reach young people in Scotland, many of whom have been affected by sectarianism. It also reflects the key findings from the survey Action for Children Scotland recently carried out with young people accessing our services seeking their views on the Scottish Government's proposals to tackle sectarianism, a copy of which is attached.

Young people's views

Action for Children Scotland is committed to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion within our services, and throughout society as a whole. Action for Children Scotland is aware that sectarian behaviour and offending have impacted upon people's lives, and upon communities, across Scotland. We are further aware, from our experience of delivering services across Scotland to support difficult to reach young people, that many young people in Scotland have been affected, or know other people who have been affected, by issues around sectarianism. We believe it is, therefore, important that young people's voices are heard in the current debate around the Scottish Government's proposals to tackle sectarianism. As part of this process, Action for Children Scotland considers it is essential that the Scottish Government and other agencies, involved in developing effective strategies and interventions to tackle sectarianism and other forms of hatred in Scotland, should draw upon young people's experience in these areas.

The key findings of Action for Children Scotland's young people's survey provides further evidence of the scale of sectarianism within our society. Reflecting this, 36% of the young people who participated in the survey confirmed that they had been treated badly or unfairly because of sectarianism or some other form of hatred, while 59% said that they knew someone else who had been treated badly or unfairly because of such behaviour. Significantly, 47% of those who participated in the survey confirmed that

sectarianism was a big problem within their community, and 65% said they believe that sectarianism is increasing in Scotland. Against this background, we welcome the priority being given by the Scottish Government to tackling sectarianism and other forms of hatred in our society.

Developing an effective strategy

Action for Children Scotland's concern, however, is that the proposed Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Bill focuses on football and on the Internet, when sectarianism is actually much more widespread, and permeates many aspects of every day life in Scotland. This was one of the key messages which emerged from Action for Children Scotland's young people's survey. A total of 62% of the young people who participated in the survey confirmed, for example, that the problem of sectarianism was much wider than just being a problem at football matches and on the Internet, and were aware of it on a regular basis. Action for Children Scotland believes that the starting point for the Scottish Government's strategy for tackling sectarianism and other forms of hatred must, therefore, be recognition of the wide ranging, and deep rooted, nature of sectarianism in many parts of Scotland. We consider that the strategy, if it is to be effective, will require long-term action and initiatives in a number of areas such as, for example, cultural change, religion, education, criminal justice and in sport.

Promoting cultural change

Sectarianism has had an adverse impact upon culture and communities across Scotland. Action for Children Scotland believes that this raises significant question marks over whether or not introducing tougher sentencing for sectarian offences linked to football and the Internet will help to eradicate a problem which has historically permeated our society. Action for Children Scotland believes that securing a long term solution to sectarianism will require significant cultural change across generations. The need for such change is underlined by the young people's survey, which confirmed that 44% of the young people said they believe people hold sectarian views as a direct result of how they were brought up. Promoting greater religious and cultural tolerance will, therefore, require actions and interventions which change people's views about culture and religion, and help them to pass on more tolerant and inclusive messages to their families.

We believe that the process of promoting cultural change could draw upon the learning and experience from Action for Children Scotland's youth services. Our services deliver a range of interventions which help to address vulnerable young people's problematical behaviour, which is often long term and entrenched. Action for Children Scotland's interventions take a people centered and holistic approach to help young people to turn their lives around. This approach is designed to raise young people's awareness of how their own behaviour can often create obstacles and barriers, which make it difficult for them to fulfill their potential. Action for Children Scotland has a proven track record of supporting young people to make the most of their lives, and to sustain the positive changes they make in their lives. We take an outcomes focused approach, and believe that many of the interventions we use could be adapted effectively to deliver the long term cultural changes which will be necessary to tackle sectarianism in its many forms. In this respect, Action for Children Scotland would be happy to share the learning of how we help difficult to reach young people to turn their lives around.

Need for a multi-agency approach

Action for Children Scotland believes that achieving the type of effective, long term cultural change necessary to end sectarianism and other forms of hatred will require a co-ordinated, multi-agency approach. Action for Children Scotland considers that such an approach should involve the Scottish Government, local authorities, the police, churches, schools, the SFA, football clubs, NHS Health Boards and the voluntary sector etc. Action for Children Scotland believes that this approach is vital if we are to deliver the significant cultural change necessary to develop a fairer, more inclusive Scotland, in which the diversity and achievements of all our communities and cultures are recognised and celebrated equally.

Sentencing

Significantly, 47% of young people believe that tougher sentences will not bring an end to sectarianism, and to other forms of hatred in Scotland. In addition, 52% of the young people said that other actions would be necessary to stop sectarianism. The alternatives to tougher jail sentences suggested by the young people included the delivery of education programmes in schools focusing on the need to raise awareness about sectarianism. Other recommendations included the greater use of different kinds of punishments such as football banning orders, and restorative justice programmes through which the perpetrators of sectarian offences are required to meet the victims of their offences. Against this background, Action for Children Scotland takes the view that the Scottish Government's approach to tackling sectarianism should focus on community based disposals, on rehabilitation programmes and on the greater use of education and other programmes designed to promote long term cultural change, rather than on introducing tougher jail sentences. We believe that the Scottish Government should make a statement to the Justice Committee, during its Stage 1 consideration of the legislation, outlining the type of actions and interventions the government and other agencies will be taking in these areas as part of the Scottish Government's overall strategy for tackling sectarianism and other forms of hatred.

The need for early intervention

Many of the young people who participated in Action for Children Scotland's survey also highlighted the need for nurseries and schools to intervene earlier, and to work with younger children, to help raise awareness about sectarianism, and to promote the long term cultural change necessary to tackle this problem effectively. Action for Children Scotland considers that our *Roots of Empathy* pilot project, which we recently launched with North Lanarkshire Council, could make a significant contribution to progressing this cultural change.

Roots of Empathy is an effective and proven intervention programme for reducing bullying and aggression within schools through providing school children with opportunities to engage with mothers and their babies. We believe this programme will help to enhance protective factors and to promote greater levels of emotional and social wellbeing in children, and to reduce the risks of aggression and violence, including sectarian behaviour and offending, before it takes root in families and in communities.

Roots of Empathy has helped to significantly increase empathy and pro-social behaviour amongst participating children, and to decrease their social aggression. Children who have participated in *Roots of Empathy* have consistently experienced:

- A decrease in aggression compared to an increase amongst non-participants;

- A significant and greater increase in pro-social behaviour in comparison to their peers;
- A bigger increase in social and emotional understanding in comparison to non-participants;
- Significantly more knowledge about how to help a baby and were more confident in their ability to be a parent than their peers; and
- A greater feeling of support from their classmates and teacher, and being more autonomous, than children in comparison groups.

Roots of Empathy has proven success in Canada, the US, New Zealand, Australia and the Isle of Man. Recent programmes in North Lanarkshire, Ireland and Northern Ireland are already showing signs of success. Action for Children Scotland believes that programmes such as *Roots of Empathy* could make an important contribution to promote the cultural change which will be necessary across generations if we are to put an end to sectarianism and to other forms of hatred.

The importance of Education

Action for Children Scotland believes that the education system, including primary and secondary schools and further and higher education, must play a major role in helping to raise awareness about sectarianism, and to promote the cultural change required to help develop a society which is fairer and more inclusive. The young people who responded to Action for Children Scotland's survey recommended that special programmes should be developed for use in schools to help tackle sectarianism. Action for Children Scotland works with difficulty to reach young people across Scotland, many of whom have been affected by sectarianism. We would be willing to draw upon our experience in this area to help develop suitable programme material for use in schools, and in further and higher education. Action for Children Scotland also supports the young people's suggestion that experts should be invited into schools to promote awareness and understanding of the key issues relating to sectarianism, and how sectarianism impacts on people's lives.

Please do not hesitate to contact Louise Warde Hunter, Head of Action for Children Scotland, or Paul Carberry, Operational Director of Children's Services or Robert McGeachy, Policy & Public Affairs Manager, on 0141 550 9010 if you require more information about any of the issues raised in Action for Children Scotland's evidence.