

January 2009

# Action for Children Scotland

# policy briefing

## Family support

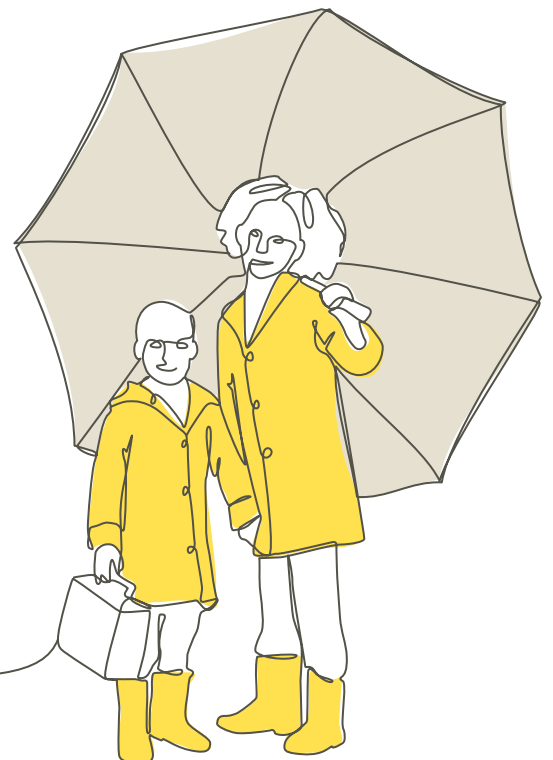
A difficult or traumatic childhood can result in a poor start in life from which many young people never recover. Providing the right help and support at the right time can be crucial in helping children and families overcome difficulties and turn their lives around. Effective early intervention can prevent much more serious problems from developing in later life.

Action for Children Scotland's family support work seeks to strengthen family relationships, and to help families find their own solutions to their difficulties. It addresses many issues, including family breakdown, anti-social behaviour, alcohol and drug problems, depression, domestic violence, offending and child protection.

The key objectives of our family support services are:

- ▶ to help vulnerable and difficult to reach children and families make the most of their lives
- ▶ to help excluded and difficult to reach children and families to access universal provision and services including housing, education and social work services

- ▶ to support under-fives to access nursery provision, and to support older children through primary and/or secondary school
- ▶ to help children and families behaving in an anti-social manner to address their behaviour, and support their integration back into the local community
- ▶ to help children living with drug or alcohol-dependent parents to develop their coping skills
- ▶ to support children and young people who are carers for a family member



## What Action for Children Scotland wants to see

Action for Children Scotland welcomes the new Scottish Government's commitment to increase free nursery school entitlement. We also want effective family support services focusing on early intervention and prevention to be made available on a more consistent basis. We welcome the Scottish Government and COSLA's publication of the early years framework, which highlights the need to ensure the early years of a child's life (pre-birth to eight) are right and to give children the best start in life, and the key aims of *Getting it right for every child in foster care and kinship care – A national strategy*.

We also welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to intensive support based on early intervention and

on prevention. The impact of the 'hidden harm' caused by parental drug and alcohol misuse is one of the factors underpinning the need for such services. We believe services that treat and support parents with drug and alcohol dependencies should also recognise the needs of children and young people affected by parental addiction, and should provide support for them. Action for Children Scotland will work with the Scottish Government, local authorities and other agencies to ensure support is made available that helps parents with drug or alcohol problems and, at the same time, reduces the number of children referred for statutory services.

## What we would also like to see

We also want to see:

- ▶ a long-term approach to other areas of family support, such as supporting families to access key services, and helping difficult to reach children through nursery and school
- ▶ medium- to long-term funding being put in place on a sustainable basis to strengthen the effectiveness of family support services, with funding streams and the related reporting mechanisms being simplified
- ▶ action to address the shortage of suitably qualified social workers, which has meant many vulnerable and difficult to reach children and families are not getting the support they require or cannot access key services
- ▶ improvements to the integration of services, in part by ensuring that voluntary organisations working with children and families are involved in the early stages of the planning processes around integrated children's services
- ▶ better recognition given by government, local authorities and other key agencies to the particular difficulties faced by children and families trying to secure support and access services in rural and remote areas



## Key areas of our supporting families work

### Early years

A number of Action for Children Scotland's services focus on early years and supporting parenting and child development. These services seek to strengthen family relationships and counter the effects of disadvantage by empowering children and families. For example, the Inverness Family Project provides a wide range of services, including a parents group that helps parents with mild learning difficulties to manage family relationships and their children's needs; groups for parents and younger children that promote parent-child relationships through play and positive interaction; stay and play groups and a pre-nursery group; and home visiting for individual families to help parents develop their skills.

A similar approach to supporting children and families is taken by other Action for Children Scotland services. Lochaber Families Project, for example, provides assistance and support to families with young children through home visits and group work. By promoting positive play and active learning, staff are able to work with parents on issues around their children's development, including difficulties with eating, sleeping and behaviour. They also provide support in situations where factors such as depression, drugs, domestic violence, debt, and bereavement are affecting parenting ability.

### Early intervention

All Action for Children Scotland's family support services emphasise early intervention, as illustrated by our Western Isles Child and Family Support Service in Stornoway. The service works with children, young people and their families who have been identified as requiring help by the social work department, the children's hearings system, or as a result of families referring themselves. By working in partnership with other agencies, the service provides a creative, flexible approach designed to ensure that any identified issues are dealt with effectively.

A key feature of this service is that staff draw up action plans, and relevant agencies then get involved with the referrer and the families in order to create clear guidelines and consistency, which assists in the monitoring of the service. Reviews are held regularly to ensure action plans are being used to their maximum potential.



## Tackling anti-social behaviour

Other Action for Children Scotland projects focus on supporting families involved in anti-social behaviour who are facing eviction as a result of their actions. The Dundee Families Project, for example, has made a significant contribution in reducing anti-social behaviour by providing intensive support to such families. This pioneering project, developed by Action for Children Scotland in partnership with Dundee City Council, is increasingly viewed as a positive solution to one of the most difficult social problems facing many of our communities today. It is now being replicated across the UK.

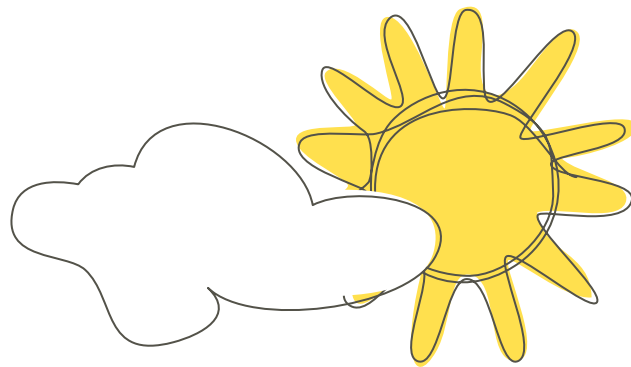
The Dundee Families Project seeks to prevent the recurrence of homelessness through eviction, and to improve the quality of life for vulnerable children, young people and adults. Participants are subject to strict supervision, and face the imposition of ASBOs and/or parenting orders should they breach the agreement for participating in the project. This service has demonstrated consistent success in helping families to change, to provide stability for their children and to live in peace with their neighbours. An independent evaluation of the project, carried out by researchers from the University of

Glasgow in 2001, also found that the project provided value for money. They calculated that the project produced an overall saving of £117,600 a year for Dundee City Council by dealing more effectively with the problem of anti-social behaviour. This is without taking account of the long-term benefits of more stable communities and the positive impact on families receiving the service. The Dundee Families Project's work has reduced evictions and prevented children being taken into care, resulting in substantial financial savings for the local authority.

Action for Children Scotland has set up the Aberdeen Families Project based on the Dundee Families model. This project is a joint initiative between Action for Children Scotland and Aberdeen City Council, and is designed to tackle the problems of anti-social behaviour in families and within the wider community. Action for Children Scotland also welcomed the Scottish Government's award of funding to 'Breaking the Cycle' pathfinder projects in South Lanarkshire, Falkirk and in Perth and Kinross. These projects will provide intensive supervision and early intervention for individuals and families involved in anti-social behaviour, and will seek to learn from the success of the Dundee Families Project.



## Key areas of our supporting families work (continued)



### Partnership working

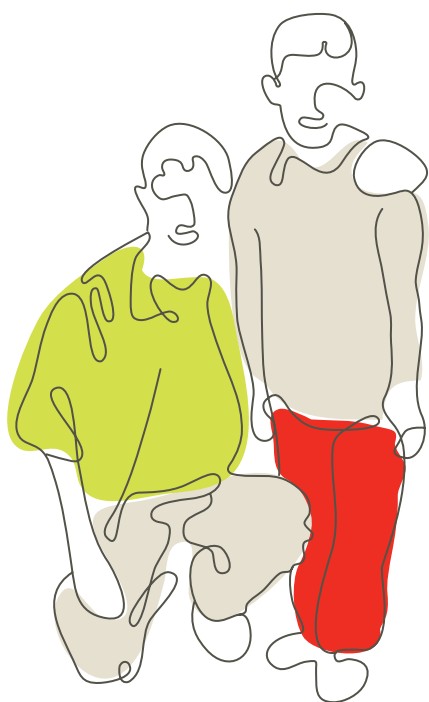
Action for Children Scotland annually delivers services in 29 out of 32 local authorities in Scotland. Drawing upon our extensive experience of providing family support services, we believe that no single agency can address the often complex needs of vulnerable and difficult to reach children, young people and families.

We have a proven track record in partnership working with a wide range of agencies, including local authorities. Indeed, most of the referrals to our projects come from local authorities. This involves working closely with social work and education departments to identify families' needs, and providing appropriate support tailored to meet these needs.

### Support for young carers

Although more attention is now being paid to the role of carers in our society, most of it concentrates on the role of adult carers, and the growing public interest is not yet being matched by an increase in resources to support them. Action for Children Scotland runs a number of projects, including the North Lanarkshire Young Carers Project, that support young carers. Our practice experience shows how valuable such service can be in enhancing the wellbeing of the child and their family.

Sympathy needs to be turned into action, so that every young carer is able to access appropriate local support for themselves. This support must be offered in a way that complements the help being offered to the person(s) being cared for. If issues of significant harm arise with regard to the young carer, then these must be confronted and dealt with professionally. However, in the vast majority of cases these can be managed by supporting the child within their family.



## Who we are

Action for Children Scotland is one of the leading children's charities in Scotland, working in partnership to run more than 65 services for more than 7,000 of Scotland's most vulnerable children and young people and their families. Across the UK, we run nearly 450 services. Action for Children Scotland's services include family centres and services for care leavers and young people who are homeless. We also support children and young people who act as carers and those with additional support for learning needs, and we offer alternatives to custody for those in trouble with the law.

## Other services

### North Lanarkshire Young Carers Project, Motherwell

The service was established to provide support for young people under 18 who care for a relative who is ill, has a disability, is experiencing mental distress or is affected by substance abuse. It aims to raise awareness about the needs of young carers, and provide a wide range of services based on the needs of young carers that may give them more opportunities to participate in a normal social, educational and emotional life.

### Renfrewshire Primary Support Project

This service focuses on intensive family support and early intervention. It provides support to parents and primary-aged children at risk of becoming significant offenders. It offers a wide range of services aimed at

enhancing parental support and promoting greater parental responsibility. Its overall aims include reducing the number of young people being placed on supervision, reducing the number of school exclusions and enabling more parents to address their own needs, including illness or addiction.

### San Jai Family Project

The service provides a vital resource to Chinese children and families because it operates an accessible drop-in information and advice service staffed by three full-time bilingual Chinese workers. This direct service to the community is a focal point for Chinese people in the Glasgow area to meet, share and make contact with each other. It also provides individual/family support on a confidential casework level. Project staff work closely with service users to enable them to make informed decisions about their lives.

Please contact Andrew Girvan, Action for Children Scotland's Director of Children's Services, or Paul Carberry, Action for Children Scotland's Operational Director of Children's Services, on **0141 550 9010**, or Ann Darlington, Action for Children Scotland's Assistant Director, on **01463 717227**, if you require more information or if you would like to discuss any of the issues we have raised.

[www.actionforchildren.org.uk](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk)

*as long as it takes*