

ELECTED MEMBER BRIEFING NOTE No. 13

Growing Up in Scotland - Key Messages



What is the purpose of the Briefing Note series?

The IS has developed an Elected Members Briefing Series to help Elected Members keep abreast with key issues affecting local government.

Some Briefing Notes will be directly produced by IS staff but we will also publish material from as wide a range of public bodies, commentators and observers of public services as possible.

We will use the IS website and Elected Member e-Bulletin to publicise and provide access to the Briefing Notes. All Briefing Notes in the series can be accessed at www.improvementservice.org.uk/elected-members-development.

What is the issue?

The Scottish Government and their local partners are committed to improving the outcomes for Scottish children. Specific aims are stated in the Early Years Framework (www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/257007/0076309.pdf), developed jointly by the Scottish Government and COSLA. But how do policy makers and practitioners know what gives children ‘the best start in life’ and ensures they are ready to learn?

Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) provides an important part of the Scottish evidence base on the impact of early childhood experiences on later outcomes. GUS is the longitudinal research study tracking the lives of over 10,000 children and their families across Scotland from birth through to the teenage years. Since 2005, interviewers have been visiting families every year, to collect information about their child’s experiences, health and development. The ‘longitudinal’ nature of the study means that in time, researchers will be able to consider information about children’s early experiences alongside information about their progress through school and beyond. A new group of 6,000 families with babies born during 2010/11 are currently being recruited to take part in GUS. This new information will allow researchers to compare the experiences of these children with those born six years earlier and will tell us whether the experiences of children ‘growing up in Scotland’ are changing. GUS is unique in its ability to look at service provision and systems that are particular to Scotland.

Findings from the study have contributed to the evidence base supporting the argument for increased investment in the early years and early intervention, a strategy now adopted by the Scottish Government through its ‘Preventative Spend’ agenda, whereby funding of services to prevent social problems is increased to reduce the need for expensive ‘crisis response’ services later on. This approach is further endorsed by the Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services.

Findings on a range of subjects, including those listed below, have been published over the last five years and are available on the GUS website (www.growingupinScotland.org.uk).

Topics covered by GUS include:

- family circumstances and change, including employment and income;
- housing;
- satisfaction with local neighbourhood and services;
- use of childcare and other services;
- child health and development;
- experiences of pre-school and primary school;
- parental health (including mental health);
- non-resident parents;

- diet and physical activity;
- activities undertaken by children/the home learning environment;
- support for parents;
- parenting styles and responsibilities.

Some of the key findings from GUS are outlined below:

- Most children in Scotland are growing up healthy and happy with no developmental difficulties. However, a significant minority of children are not. Too many children in Scotland are not getting the ‘best start in life’ that they are entitled to because they are growing up in disadvantaged circumstances that are not promoting good health and development. Some children are arriving at pre-school and school ill-equipped to deal with the daily challenges of learning and being part of a school community. Around one in ten children starting school in Scotland have some type of social, emotional or behavioural difficulty (as measured by a behavioural screening tool called SDQ - Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire). The most common type of difficulty is conduct problems - just over one quarter of five year olds have moderate or severe difficulties in this area¹. Child health and parenting styles were found to have an impact on child behaviour.
- In terms of cognitive ability (vocabulary and problem solving skills), GUS has found significant differences in the abilities of children from different social backgrounds at age three and at age five². The differences found at age three were found to persist at age five. Parents’ education has the biggest influence - at age five, compared to children whose parents have no qualifications, those with a degree educated parent are around 18 months ahead on vocabulary and 13 months ahead on problem-solving ability. When looking at factors that can help improve abilities between the ages of three and five, GUS finds that good parent-child relationships, having consistent rules and routines, and regularly doing home-learning activities like reading and singing together have a positive impact on a child’s development.
- A GUS report looking at the circumstances of children growing up in ‘persistent poverty’ considered the impact of growing up in families experiencing consistently low income³. One in four 4 year olds had been living in such families since birth while two in five children had experienced poverty at least once during their first four years. Persistent poverty is most common among families where no one works, in lone parent families and in families living in social rented housing. GUS suggests that low income in itself does not have a direct negative impact on children’s development but poverty is related to other disadvantages which together can have a negative impact on children’s well-being. The effects of living in poverty are complex. Children living in the most deprived areas in Scotland are more likely than others to experience long term health problems, poor general health, accidents, behavioural problems and language development difficulties.

- GUS identifies support for parents as one of the most important factors affecting outcomes for children. Parents who feel they get enough support in bringing up their children both from ‘formal’ sources (services) and ‘informal’ sources (from family and friends) are more likely to do more home learning activities with their children, leading to improved cognitive ability^{4 5}. Mothers who feel supported are less likely to experience mental health difficulties while their children are young. This has a positive impact on children’s social, emotional and behavioural development⁶. Furthermore, parents who feel supported are more open to seeking help and advice when required, leading to improved health outcomes for their children⁷.

These findings tell us that support for parents is important but forms only part of the solution in tackling the inequalities brought about by children experiencing disadvantage in their earliest years.

Why does the issue matter?

The findings of GUS can inform policy development and service planning at the local authority and community planning partnership level. For example, the findings can inform:

- integrated children's services planning;
- childcare strategies;
- community planning/neighbourhood planning;
- health improvement strategies;
- parenting strategies;
- Single Outcome Agreements and progress indicators.

Families from every local authority in Scotland are taking part in GUS. They are representative of all families in Scotland with children of this age. GUS is a national study which means that findings are not available at the local authority level. However, GUS is very relevant for local authorities - the findings can provide contextual information for service planning and decision making and can also provide useful data against which to benchmark local data or 'outcomes'. (See Using the findings from the Growing up in Scotland Study - A Guide for Local Authorities, www.crfr.ac.uk/gus/guideforLAs.pdf)

When used in combination with other sources of information and data, such as the Census, GUS findings at the national level can be used to deduce or estimate what is happening locally. Some suggestions for ways in which the GUS findings can influence policy development, service planning and service delivery within your local authority are outlined below:

- GUS provides a wealth of information about the circumstances of children living in lone parent families, including the degree of contact with non-resident parents. The experiences of lone parent families at the local authority level are likely to be similar to those at national level. The proportion of lone parents living in an area can be derived from the Census.
- In the second year of GUS, families were asked detailed questions about the availability and use of a range of local services and facilities. Not surprisingly, people living in rural areas were less likely to have access to facilities than those living in urban areas. The facilities that were used most often by all families were the GP, playground or park area and community health services, with little variation by urban/rural area. When asked about the services most in need of improvement, facilities for young children was the most frequently mentioned, followed by the provision of good quality affordable housing. Families living in urban areas were more concerned about the level of crime than those in rural areas, whilst those living in rural areas were more likely to want improvements to public transport than those in urban areas. Such findings could usefully feed into a local authority's community planning/neighbourhood planning activities and policy decisions.

- GUS has found that there is a strong link between the age of mothers at the birth of their child and the level of deprivation of the area in which the family lives. Half of teenage mothers lived in areas in the most deprived Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) quintile, whereas only 3% lived in areas in the least deprived quintile. Mothers who had their child in their 30s or 40s, by contrast, were much more likely to live in the least deprived areas. These findings could be used by local authorities and Health Boards to develop a profile of mothers/parents in particular areas and to target services accordingly.
- GUS has also uncovered that there are continuing differences in the use of various types of childcare provision between large urban areas and remote rural areas. Nurseries are more commonly used in large urban areas whilst there is a higher use of childminders and playgroups in remote rural areas. These findings might be used by local authorities to inform the planning and development of childcare services.
- GUS has found that not all children are similarly placed to take advantage of the education provided by local authorities. This has an impact on teachers, other children in the class and children themselves. Difficulties at home and school make it more difficult for children to learn, the impact of which can last a lifetime and even have a negative impact on future generations. Such findings suggest that retaining and increasing investment in early years' services and support within local authorities and their partner organisations is fundamental in tackling inequalities in Scotland.

What is the challenge for Elected Members?

Elected Members have a key role to play in ensuring that their local authority considers the findings emerging from the GUS study and other relevant research elsewhere in the UK, such as the Marmot Review 2010 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives' (www.instituteofhealthequity.org/Content/FileManager/pdf/fairsocietyhealthylives.pdf), which considers the role and influence of local government in England in reducing health inequalities.

Elected Members should ensure that:

- Policy development and spending decisions are based on current and relevant research evidence and a 'common sense approach' which supports the argument for investment in early years, early intervention and prevention. This is reflective of the key recommendations of the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services that public service providers should take demand out of the system through preventative actions and early intervention to tackle the root causes of inequality and negative outcomes. This is in response to findings that an estimated 40% of all spending on public services is accounted for by interventions that could have been avoided by prioritising a preventative approach.
- Council services and partner organisations are working together in the best interests of children and their families, using the Getting it Right for Every Child approach. The Highland Pathfinder for Getting it Right demonstrated the benefits to children and families and to practitioners of such an approach.
- Budget constraints do not have a negative impact on services for our youngest children and their families. Information on the economic impact of intervention in the early years is available at www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Research/by-topic/children-and-young-people/EarlyYears.
- Services are in place to support the most vulnerable families so that children are ready to take full advantage of school and pre-school. Information on the most effective interventions is available at www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Research/by-topic/children-and-young-people/EarlyYears2. See also 'Interventions for Promoting Early Child Development for Health' (<https://www.scphrp.ac.uk/node/103>).
- Local authorities have good working relationships with voluntary sector organisations working in their area to support children and their families.

What does good practice look like?

Early intervention with children, young people and families helps them achieve their potential and reduces the need for costlier interventions in the longer term. Services should be planned and delivered to ensure that every child has the best start in life and is ready to succeed.

Evidence from Scotland and elsewhere in the UK suggests that the following are critical to ensuring the effectiveness of early intervention activity:

- an integrated workforce - professionals from across partner agencies need to work on the basis of a shared purpose to improve outcomes;
- consideration of how resources (financial, staff, assets) are currently used, and can be better used, across partner agencies to support early intervention;
- perseverance of professionals in building relationships with children and families;
- access to parenting support for those that need and want it, delivered in a way that suits them. For example, some parents prefer one-to-one support whilst others are happy with a group format;
- helping children, families and communities to secure better outcomes for themselves;
- understanding the complex circumstances of vulnerable families - how did they get to where they are?

The Scottish Government's Early Years Unit has collated a number of local good practice case studies around implementation of the Early Years Framework. These focus on examples of how councils and their partners are:

- helping children, families and communities secure outcomes for themselves;
- breaking cycles of poverty, inequality and poor outcomes in and through early years;
- focusing on engaging and empowering children, families and communities;
- using the strength of universal services to deliver prevention and early intervention;
- putting quality at the heart of service delivery;
- delivering services that meet the needs of children and families;
- improving outcomes and children's quality of life through play;
- collaborating to simplify and streamline service delivery.

The case studies can be accessed at www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/Early-Years-and-Family/Early-Years-Framework/Implementation/Case-Studies.

Key questions to consider

Elected Members may wish to consider the following questions:

- Do the GUS research findings reflect your experiences and understanding of your council area, or are you surprised by some of these findings?
- What do the findings mean for the planning and delivery of services for children and families in your area? Do current planning mechanisms take account of GUS findings and other relevant research evidence?
- Are you confident that the GUS findings are being considered by your council and its community planning partners as part of policy development and service planning?
- Are you confident that council services, partner organisations and people in your area are working together to support parents in doing their best for their children?
- Does your council have a local Parenting Strategy?

Key messages and learning points for Elected Members

There is a growing body of evidence from neuro-science, economics, medical and social sciences supporting the case for increased investment in early years and early intervention to produce ‘maximum return’ on public investment. GUS is part of this evidence base, focusing on the circumstances and experiences of Scottish children and their families.

The findings of GUS can help to inform policy development and service planning at the local authority and community planning partnership level.

‘There is an absolute economic imperative for us to tackle the issue of improving children’s Early Years with renewed vigour and to think and work differently in the future. But there is an even more pressing social and moral imperative to do better.’

Professor Susan Deacon in ‘Joining the Dots - a better start for Scotland’s children (2011)
www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/343337/0114216.pdf

‘The risks to children, particularly those who live in poverty, are indisputably higher and not only are they long term (life long in many cases), these risks are impacting on children right now. We can do something about this if we choose to. Not to act is a choice.’

Stephen Moore, Executive Director (Social Work), Fife Council

Further support and contacts

- Growing Up in Scotland website, www.growingupinScotland.org.uk or e-mail lesley.kelly@ed.ac.uk
- Parenting Across Scotland website, www.parentingacrossScotland.org
- Joining the Dots a better start for Scotland's children - An independent report by Professor Susan Deacon, www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/343337/0114216.pdf
- Scottish Government Early Years pages (inc Early Years Framework), www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/Early-Years-and-Family
- GIRFEC (Getting it right for every child), www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/gettingitright
- Scottish Parliament Finance Committee Inquiry into Preventative Spending, www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/finance/inquiries/preventative.htm
- Report on the Future Delivery of Public Services chaired by Dr Campbell Christie, <http://scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/06/27154527/0>
- SPICe Briefing - Early Years subject profile, www.scottish.parliament.uk/business/research/briefings-11/SB11-51.pdf
- Play Talk Read website, www.playtalkread.org
- Child and Maternal Health website, www.maternal-and-early-years.org.uk
- 'Fair Society, Healthy Lives' The Marmot Review, www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review

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3. Barnes, M (2010) 'Growing Up in Scotland: The circumstances of persistently poor children' Scottish Government. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/04/26095519/12
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5. Bromley, C (2009) 'Growing Up in Scotland: The impact of children's early activities on cognitive development' Scottish Government. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/03/16101519/0
6. Marryat, L (2010) 'Growing Up in Scotland: Maternal mental health and its impact on child behaviour and development' Scottish Government. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/04/26102536/0
7. Bromley, C (2010) 'Growing Up in Scotland: Health inequalities in the early years' Scottish Government. www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/04/26103009/0

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