Key Points

- Local Children’s Services Plans need to consider both holistic family support approaches, as well as ensuring that there are targeted services for both fathers and mothers.

- Barnardo’s Scotland has in general found it harder to engage and support fathers, and partnership with other services has been particularly important in helping to reach fathers. Other social work services can become better at identifying men with parental responsibilities.

- Gender stereotypes about the role of men in raising and supporting children are persistent, but parenting education in schools, increasing the number of men in the childcare profession and improving the quality and flexibility of childcare would all help erode these stereotypes.

- Barnardo's Scotland would be concerned at any suggestions to changes to contact arrangements in Scotland that were not fully based primarily on the needs, wellbeing and rights of the child.

The importance of the early years

The experience of our services shows very strongly that investment in parenting support is just as important for fathers as it is for mothers, and throughout our work we take a holistic family support approach wherever possible. The recently passed Children & Young People (Scotland) Act requires the development of local Children’s Services Plans. There is a statutory requirement that these plans focus on early intervention, and parenting support, including fathers, is a highly effective way of doing so. However, there is a danger that these Plans become maternal-normative and assume that mothers have the main role as care givers. In our view, it is important that as national and local policy plans are developed there is due attention paid to holistic family support approaches, as well as due investment in targeted support to both fathers and mothers.

There has been a growing recognition across the political spectrum, of the importance of the first few years of a child’s life. This is most clearly shown in a number of initiatives, including the Early Years Collaborative and the Early Years Change Fund.

The increased focus on the early years is based on a strong body of academic research which has identified the importance of the first few years in the brain development of children. In this period in particular the relationship between the child and the main care giver(s) is particularly important – a high quality relationship between the carer(s) and the child, in which the child feels connected, safe and responded to, results directly in the child experiencing better brain development.
A shift to greater spending in the early years and in achieving earlier intervention has been recognised as a key goal for national and local government to achieve. As recognised in the Scottish Government’s National Parenting Strategy¹, greater support to parents is a key part of this.

It is also important that local authorities continue the shift of core funding towards the early years, so that support in the early years is seen as a core function of public services. This is particularly important when things like the Early Years Change Fund are eventually removed.

**Barnardo's Scotland services to fathers**

Barnardo’s Scotland provides a number of early years and family support services across Scotland, and these all support both fathers and mothers with their support roles. These early years family support services use a variety of different approaches, including some of the specific programmes mentioned in the national Parenting Strategy, as well as other approaches that we have developed in partnership with a variety of other organisations.

However, in our view it is not so much the particular type of programme that is delivered, but rather the way in which it is delivered, that matters most and makes the biggest difference for families. This applies as much to working with fathers, as working with mothers. What makes our programmes effective in delivering outcomes is therefore the fact that we take approaches that:

- Focus on the strengths and assets of parents,
- Focus on the relationships and attachment between care givers and children,
- Prioritise the strength of relationship between our staff and the people they work with,
- Take a holistic approach to the family and consider the impact of the wider community on the family.
- Work with families to identify and overcome practical barriers (with appropriate additional external support if necessary), especially those arising from poverty and inequality such as poverty, poor housing, and so on.

We believe that focussing on the way programmes are delivered, rather than particular programme types, is a key point to be made to all those organisations, including local authorities and health boards, that are involved in directly supporting parents and commissioning services to support parents. We would warmly welcome the highlighting of this by the Equal Opportunities Committee as part of their inquiry into support for fathers.

Wherever possible we take an approach that looks holistically at a family, and that supports both mothers and fathers. However, we have, in general, found it more difficult to engage with and support fathers. As discussed below, partnership has been very important to successfully reaching fathers.

Examples of our services working with fathers include the Barnardo’s Threads project in Paisley. The project offers holistic, intensive support to young parents and their families in order

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¹ [http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/10/4789](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/10/4789)
to improve relationships and the outcomes for children. The project also supports a number of peer support groups to address a number of specific adversities, including poverty, inequality and drug and alcohol use, in order to reduce the impact of these on the children.

A specific part of the Barnardo's Threads project in Paisley works with young parents, especially fathers, who are part of families affected by domestic violence. The project works with the young parents to develop healthy and respectful relationships and to develop their understanding of the impact on the physical and emotional health of their babies.

Specific work, appropriately risk-assessed, can be targeted at men in families where specific issues are present, such as substance abuse, domestic abuse, violent behaviour or involvement in the criminal justice system, to support and challenge them to understand the impact of their behaviour on their children. We have run these kind of interventions in a number of places, including East Ayrshire.

The Barnardo's Ayrshire Family Resource Service runs a Mellow Parenting programme that is specifically aimed at fathers. In particular, to support a strengths based approach that removes the sense of blame on the individual father, the project explores the father's own experience of having been parented, to support them in being successful parents to their own children. The service also runs a number of holistic family supports that involve both father and mother, including circumstances when they may no longer necessarily be in a relationship.

We would be very happy to assist the committee, or individual members of the committee, with finding out more about our services that support fathers or to visit relevant services.

Reaching and engaging fathers

Whilst most of our family support services support both fathers and mothers, we have, in general, found it necessary to adopt specific approaches in order to successfully engage and reach fathers. This can be for a whole host of reasons, including family break-up being more likely to leave the child with the mother, and the father also being more likely to be in work within a household.

We are concerned that in some areas, services aimed at fathers have tended to focus more on older fathers, in the 25+ age category. Whilst these services are important and have important outcomes, services targeted at supporting more vulnerable younger fathers are also very important.

We have made sure across our services we recognise the roles of fathers, and that we have worked with our staff to support them to recognise that the father is a key part of the picture. This includes recognition of the specific needs to support fathers. It is important that family support services are holistic to the family, and support fathers as well as mothers. It is also important that they are properly resourced by local authorities and health boards.

We have found that supporting young fathers has required services to recognise the specific circumstances of fathers, particularly in cases where contact is not always consistent for the father. Most of our parenting support models work best with the child present, so that the relationship between care giver and child can be developed, so we encourage fathers to bring their baby along to sessions whenever possible.
In terms of improving the number of referrals of fathers to our services, the Ayrshire Family Resource Service has found the development of existing relationships with other services particularly important. For example, working with local nurseries, to encourage them to refer at risk fathers to the service, has been particularly effective. Development of the relationship has allowed the nurseries to be especially effective in demystifying the role of family support services and to remove any perceived threat. We think this is particularly important for the committee to highlight.

Despite the fact that men are almost as likely to be parents as women, many social work services do not as regularly ascertain whether men have parental responsibilities, in order to identify whether additional supports need to be put in place. This applies to mental health services and substance misuse services, for example. This is also very much the case for prisoners and young men in young offenders’ institutes. Prisons should, ultimately, have a full understanding of which of their inmates have parental responsibilities, particularly given the poor outcomes for many children affected by parental imprisonment. In this example, all prison staff should be trained to a basic level to understand and support fathers with their parental responsibilities, in order to secure better outcomes for the relevant children.

We have also found in our work with fathers that some fathers sometimes respond better to being supported by a male worker. This poses challenges for the social work workforce, which has underrepresentation from male workers\(^2\). The Committee may wish to consider recruitment and access to the social work profession in light of this issue. It is interesting to note that certain parts of the profession have much more equitable gender representation, for example 36% of social workers working with offenders are male. Male social workers working in specific circumstances should therefore be supported to understand parental responsibilities and work with fathers as appropriate.

We are concerned that in many areas fathers continue to be less likely to be involved in prenatal support services. This is important across the board, but especially with more vulnerable fathers. Earlier intervention, providing support to fathers-to-be from an earlier point, would help ensure that fathers are better supported to be successful parents. There is a role for the Health Improvement Services to play here, that the Committee may wish to highlight.

**Societal change in the role of men in raising children**

The Scottish Government’s aim for children is to make Scotland the best place to grow up. For this to be fully achieved, there needs to be a wider cultural change in Scottish society’s attitude to children. There also needs to be a cultural change in the role that men are seen to have in raising children, recognising that as many men as women become parents, but that everyone as a citizen also has a role in making Scotland a place that has a positive attitude towards children. Gender stereotypes about the role of men in raising and supporting children are still persistent, and need further work to shift. A number of further suggestions, that may help bring about that change are laid out below.

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Parenting education in schools

The Scottish Government is in the process of reviewing its guidance on relationship, sexual health and parenting education (RSHPE). We are concerned that, the parenting element is often given relatively little time alongside the other important aspects of RSHPE. Age appropriate RSHPE has an important role to play in supporting all young people for their potential future role as a parent, as well as supporting them for the more general role that we all have, as citizens, in raising children.

RSHPE has a particularly important role in supporting young men to understand the value of positive relationships to young babies, and the benefits that this brings to babies in their early brain development. All aspects of parenting, and this aspect in particular, should have a stronger emphasis within RSHPE delivery in schools.

Male role models in the childcare profession

The childcare workforce experiences extreme underrepresentation from men\(^3\), and this represents a challenge for the role of men as fathers, because of the way in which it reinforces gender stereotypes. The experience of our services suggests that positive male role models can be very positive in supporting men to become successful parents. Whilst there is a strong focus on tackling gender segregation in training applications, for example Scottish Government efforts in relation to the Modern Apprenticeship system, there has been less work done to look at what prevents men from entering the care profession in a Scottish context, and we would welcome appropriate consideration of this issue by the committee.

Flexibility and quality of Childcare

Recent steps to increase free childcare entitlements may well have a long-term positive impact on the ability of men to be more active fathers. However, as childcare continues to be developed and implemented in Scotland there also needs to be appropriate attention paid to the flexibility and quality of childcare in Scotland.

Greater flexibility in childcare would make it easier for parents to split caring responsibilities more evenly, allowing more women to return to work, and more men to spend longer taking care of children. In the case of single parent families, it would also allow more varieties of work to be possible. This flexibility is needed both in terms of how service providers structure their delivery, but also in terms of how entitlements are funded and structured.

There also needs to be greater focus on the quality of childcare, particularly in terms of the early years. Childcare needs to take greater account of what is known to science about the links between attachment and brain development. Low pay is also a continuing issue for the childcare workforce, and for many childcare staff there is little scope for career progression. Higher pay would allow more women to make a career of childcare, and might contribute towards encouraging more men to see childcare as a positive career option. We are concerned that taken together these issues are limiting the quality of childcare that is available to children and families in Scotland.

We understand that the Minister for Children and Young People has committed the Early Years Taskforce to looking at these issues further, and the committee may wish to follow any developments that the Taskforce brings forward.

**Flexible workplaces**

Whilst flexible working is becoming more commonplace, the committee may wish to consider further if any more could be done to encourage employers to make flexible arrangements for their employees. Flexible employment practices would support more fathers to take a more equitable parenting role, and would support in general a more positive approach to children in Scotland. Something like a family-friendly workplace award for employers could be worth considering.

**Fathers and contact**

Evidence shows that contact with both parents is always in the best interest of the child, unless there are concerns that contact might affect the wellbeing of the child. This is supported in the experience of our services. Adversarial breakdown of a relationship between parents also always has a negative impact on the child. Services that support families to reach amicable solutions, that are in the best interest of the child, have a very important role in this regard.

We would be concerned were the Equal Opportunities committee to suggest any changes to contact arrangements in Scotland that were not fully based primarily on the needs, wellbeing and rights of the child. This includes the right of the child to express their own opinions and be involved in decisions that affect their lives. On this basis, contact arrangements should be made in circumstances where this is beneficial for the child, and the perceived ‘rights’ of parents should not override the primacy of the rights of the child.

We would be happy to explore this issue, or indeed any of the issues raised in our submission, further with the committee, or individual members.

Barnardo’s Scotland  
27 February 2014