Introduction

Children in Scotland welcomes the opportunity to offer our comments to the Committee’s call for evidence. We are the umbrella body for the children’s sector, including education, health, social care, early years and childcare. We have over 450 members and our staff are delivering a wide range of projects and programmes in schools and other settings, with an array of public, private and third sector partners.

Children in Scotland manage Enquire (Scotland’s advice service for additional support for learning) and Resolve (the largest mediation provider in Scotland). These, together with the participatory projects that we engage in around the country, give us direct contact with the children and young people we seek to serve and offers us an invaluable insight into the experience of Scotland’s children and young people.

Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

Children in Scotland’s participation and engagement projects involve children and young people from a range of backgrounds in both rural and urban communities.

Despite this fact, gauging the prevalence of social isolation in each location would be challenging, due to the lack of robust empirical qualitative and quantitative evidence we have available to enable us to build an accurate picture of the incidence of social isolation in each setting.

However, Enquire’s caller database provides useful empirical and anecdotal information, which suggests that children and young people experience social isolation in both rural and urban settings.

Calls received also point to the fact that certain groups of children and young people may be more likely to suffer from social isolation, irrespective of location. Parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder as well as a number of Social, Emotional and Behavioural difficulties (such as ADHD) report concerns over their children suffering from social isolation, due to the fact that they may find social interactions more challenging.

Parents of the victims of bullying also reported concerns to Enquire over their children being socially isolated. Likewise, Scotland’s anti-bullying service, respectme, found in their annual survey *Bullying in Scotland 2014* (which surveyed 7839 young people aged 8 to 19 years old) that 30% of the young people surveyed
had experienced bullying in the last school year; with 23% of those who had experienced bullying feeling isolated as a result.

There are occasions where parents raising concerns over social isolation highlight their desire to access a range of resources that would allow them to better support their child, such as socialisation training, for example.

While urban settings generally provide a greater extent and range of services within a particular area, oversubscription of services or the tightening of resources in more economically challenged areas can negate any benefit that might accrue from living in an urban setting.

However, service availability can pose a problem to parents in rural settings. Parents seeking facilities or professional support for children at risk of social isolation may find that there is a lack of suitable provision within their local area and the most effective means to help reduce the risk of social isolation may not be available to them.

**Impact of social isolation, for instance loneliness and ill health**

The negative impact of social isolation on children and young people is a cause of concern for Children in Scotland, and we welcome any attempt to increase understanding and research into this field.

Our experience of directly engaging with children and young people, as well representing organisations who work in the sector, provides an evidence base which helps us to better understand the cause and effect of social isolation and the impact that this may have in other areas of a child’s life.

Children in Scotland, the Children’s Parliament and Young Scot, with support from the Scottish Youth Parliament, worked together to engage and consult with children and young people to identify how well they understand their entitlement to a broad general education under Curriculum for Excellence, including the importance of pupil participation, wider learning and wider achievement. In our project report, 2014, we found that personal and emotional events, which would include social isolation, impact significantly on children and young people’s ability to learn and to achieve. Children and young people repeatedly emphasised the negative effect stressful personal circumstances can have on their ability to concentrate and make progress. They demonstrated a self-awareness and recognition of their own feelings, and whilst many children were confident about getting the support and empathy they need in their schools, they also described the pressures of having to get into ‘school mode’ and the difficulty of doing this when things in their lives outside of school felt overwhelming.

In a piece of research conducted by one of our members, ENABLE Scotland asked 121 young people with learning disabilities: “If you don’t have a lot of friends how does this make you feel?” 30% said it made them feel sad/upset, 40% said it made
them feel lonely and 20% said it made them feel worried - indicating that there may be a correlation between social isolation and feelings of anxiety and loneliness.

This connection was also suggested in The Prince’s Trust Youth Index 2015. This survey of 2265 16-25 year-olds indicated that 54% of young people feel anxiety when meeting new people with 28% of young people reporting that they avoided meeting new people and 13% feeling too anxious to leave the house.

According to figures released by Carers Trust Scotland, there are an estimated 100,000 young carers in Scotland – a group that is particularly at risk of social isolation, and in turn, loneliness. Young carers may feel isolated because, by putting the person they look after first, they no longer have the time to see other friends and family. Children and young people with significant caring responsibilities may miss out on being able to take part in a host of extracurricular activities that are important to their physical, emotional and social wellbeing, such as sport and other recreational pursuits.

Caring for a family member who is too ill to work can also mean that households do not have the disposable income necessary to enable their child to participate in the type of social activities that their friends might be able to, which can lead to them feeling lonely and left out.

Parents and carers of disabled children may also face significant challenges, which can lead to social isolation and have an impact upon their health and wellbeing. In 2014, Children in Scotland, in partnership with for Scotland’s Disabled Children (fSDC), as part of the Parent Participation Project conducted a nationwide survey of parent carers. Respondents were asked which supports or services help them to maintain or improve their health and wellbeing. The responses were varied but most emphasised the need for respite, support and help with childcare in order to enable them to take breaks and to build a life outside of their caring role such as pursuing their career, having time to relax alone or with their partner, or taking exercise.

Many pointed out the need for local parent support groups to be able to discuss issues and feel less alone, as well as a singular point at which they could access all necessary and relevant information.

A number of respondents expressed a desire for counselling, however by far the most common response was the necessity to be able to access informal networks such as friends and family and parent support networks to stave off feelings of loneliness and to allow for time to develop social connections. Research conducted by one of our members, Voluntary Health Scotland, found that a total of 91% of voluntary health organisations taking part reported that social isolation was a major issue underpinning health inequalities and 71% highlighted poverty as a key issue. This demonstrates the connections between these three key issues and the strength of the potential negative impact of social isolation.
What is clear is that social isolation can have different consequences for different groups. Factors such as poverty, caring responsibilities, disability, ethnicity, and sexuality can give rise to feelings of isolation, which can, in turn, have a number of significant negative consequences.

**Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives (including housing, health, third sector)**

The opportunity to learn in a stimulating and safe environment with empathic and engaged staff may reduce the risk of children and young people becoming socially isolated at school and suffering from associated negative consequences, such as loneliness or low self-confidence.

However, it is important to recognise the fact that for some children and young people, the school environment can represent a source of worry and anxiety.

In the last six months alone, Enquire has received over 25 calls that link feelings of isolation or anxiety to absence from school; with interrupted learning, poor performance in exams or low educational attainment occurring as a result.

We believe school should be a place of safety and support where children and young people feel engaged, involved and included in their own learning.

Our project *Access All Areas* originally stemmed from a statutory duty to assess and improve all aspects of accessibility within schools in the Scottish Borders. The project has since broadened into having a focus on helping schools become more educationally and socially inclusive of all pupils. The focus has been, and continues to be, on developing pupil voice, pupil participation and improving awareness of children’s rights.

While the school environment is important, targeted support is clearly necessary in a number of aspects of a child or young person’s life if social isolation is to be tackled effectively.

Reducing poverty, strengthening communities and providing equality of opportunity to all children and young people in Scotland could have a profound impact on reducing levels of social isolation among Scotland’s youth.

Access to good quality housing and the opportunity to feel engaged as part of a safe and cohesive community is the focus of Children in Scotland’s *Beyond4Walls* project. Working in partnership with the Poverty Alliance, we are carrying out participatory research with young people who will in turn be supported to carry out research with other young people in their communities, to enable Wheatley Housing Group to gain a much more informed perspective on how it might meet the needs of the young people who live in its properties more effectively, both as tenants and as part of a household.
Children in Scotland believe that it is important to empower children and young people so that they are able to play an active part in making decisions that affect their own lives. Providing opportunities to allow children to make their voices heard in all aspects of their lives can increase a child’s self-confidence and resilience and can help to reduce feelings of social isolation.

**Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy**

Social isolation has the potential to impact upon the wellbeing of children and young people, yet is not expressly recognised within GiREFEC’s Wellbeing Indicators at present. While social isolation may sit within the existing indicators Nurtured, Included, and Respected, a stronger emphasis on identifying social isolation in its own right may prove beneficial.

These indicators, enshrined in primary legislation, are intended to provide a holistic picture of a child’s needs and should help service providers to ensure that personalised and integrated services are delivered.

Similarly, we would recommend express recognition of the cause and effect of social isolation within guidance documents used by GiREFEC practitioners.

**Effective awareness-raising within communities**

The children’s sector is a diverse, though cohesive, community that strongly encourages the sharing of ideas and best practice among practitioners, parents and young people themselves. There is scope for increasing awareness of issues relating to social isolation through the many forums that exist to share ideas and understanding within the sector. Our experience of and participation in events, conferences and forums across the country proves the powerful effect that giving people and professionals the opportunity to talk about their experiences can have.

There is also scope for a national campaign to raise awareness and understanding of social isolation among the wider public in general, but particularly among professionals and practitioners who work with children and young people.

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Children in Scotland is Scotland’s national agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents over 450 members, including 90% of Scottish Local Authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children's agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children's services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and the European Union.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It services a number of groups such as: the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland) and the Scotland’s Children’s Sector Forum. Children in Scotland also hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve:ASL, Scotland’s largest independent education mediation service.