

FINANCE COMMITTEE

DRAFT BUDGET 2014-15

SUBMISSION FROM CHILDREN IN SCOTLAND

1. Children in Scotland is the national umbrella agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and families, with around 400 members. We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Finance Committee's call for evidence on the National Performance Framework, as part of the process of scrutinising the Scottish Government's draft Budget for 2014-15.

2. Our comments in this submission reflect our remit to support and promote improved outcomes for children, young people and their parents/carers, so our contribution focuses on these aspects of the NPF.

General Observations.

3. The National Performance Framework project was always going to be a major challenge to deliver and the Scottish Government is to be commended for its ambition in drawing together a hierarchy of strategic objectives, supported by national outcomes and key indicators. The shift of focus towards measuring outcomes, rather than inputs and processes was also a positive development. However, while we welcomed the inclusion of some outcomes and indicators in the NPF directly related to children and young people, they only represent around 16% of the 50 indicators in the Framework and only two indicators relate directly to pre-school children.

4. Children in Scotland has also welcomed the major shift of policy towards the principles of prevention, early intervention and a strong focus on the early years. As we note below, however, we consider that it is too early to come to a reasoned view as to whether resources are following the shift of policy to any significant extent.

The NPF as a means of measuring improved outcomes for children, young people and families.

5. Life chances and outcomes for children and young people are directly affected by a whole range of environments and issues covered by the NPF eg deprivation, housing, play and recreational space, health and other inequalities, public safety etc. We suggest, therefore, that scrutiny of only the few indicators which refer to children and young people would present a seriously incomplete and potentially misleading picture of progress in dealing with the many aspects of Scottish life which affect children.

6. Rather than focus solely on the specific outcomes and indicators relating to children and young people, we recommend, therefore, that the Scottish Government must take a broader overview across all relevant elements of the NPF to ensure that it can present a full picture of progress in improving outcomes in a positive and sustainable way for the youngest members of Scottish society.

Choice of outcomes and indicators.

7. We are aware that the Scottish Government is not directly responsible for day to day delivery of the services which will, in reality, determine whether improved outcomes are generated for our children, young people and their families. Therefore, identifying available and consistent data and information from a wide range of service providers, notably local government and the NHS Boards, was always going to be a major challenge.

8. There was always unease, however, that the indicators directly affecting children and young people were dictated by what information was readily available, rather than what would be the optimum measures to show that the lives and opportunities for our children and young people are being improved. While the limited national outcomes aimed directly at children and young people are laudable, we have significant reservations as to whether the related national indicators are sufficient to show if they are being delivered.

9. For example, the indicator “improving children’s services” seems focused entirely on child protection inspection results. It is clearly important to know that child protection services are scrutinised and improved where needed, but we suggest that this indicator either needs to be retitled “improving child protection services” or the range of services covered by the indicator needs to be widened. The Care Inspectorate’s new methodology goes beyond child protection services, so there is perhaps an opportunity to realign this indicator to cover a wider range of services which, we believe, would be the more desirable and meaningful option.

10. Inspection reports are essentially retrospective audits on the performance of services, rather than measurement of sustained and improved outcomes for those who use them. This contention applies to the indicators around positive inspections of schools and pre-school settings. These are valuable in reassuring parents and funders that providers are offering high quality services, but we would argue that they say little about the experiences of children and young people and whether outcomes for them are actually improving and thus contributing to meeting the associated national outcomes.

11. The national indicators around healthy birth weight, dental health, weight and physical activity are certainly useful as quantifiable ways of looking at the health and development of children but they are effectively proxy measures. We are not convinced that what are statistical snapshots tell us nearly enough for anyone to take a reasoned view on whether outcomes for our children are improving, particularly in respect of the early years.

Proposals for improvement.

12. Children in Scotland accepts that, in the current financial environment, developing expensive and extensive new data collection systems may not be a viable option and we recognise the benefits of using existing and consistent data sources wherever possible. Our question remains, however, as to whether the national indicators which are directly aimed at children and young people really provide the right and right amount of information to show progress in meeting the associated national outcomes.

13. Children in Scotland also questions whether advances in Scottish Government policy priorities aimed at children, young people and parents/carers (and their associated measures) have resulted in the NPF being overtaken and sidelined as far as looking at progress in improving outcomes for children and young people. In suggesting this, we see considerable and positive scope to create a more meaningful and streamlined framework and better alignment between the Framework and other current and developing measures of improved outcomes for children and young people.

14. The current planning and policy environments relating to children and young people are very complex. In our view, they do not link up well, thus adding to bureaucracy and lack of clarity for practitioners, planners, policy makers and families. Children in Scotland has been concerned for some time that planning for children's services, a legal requirement under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, is largely peripheral to wider Community Planning and the associated Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) process. As we indicate earlier in this submission, outcomes for children and young people are affected by a wide range of environmental and societal factors and we firmly believe that plans for direct support to children and young people should not be seen as separate from wider community development.

15. The duty on local authorities to produce and publish children's services plans is augmented in the Children and Young People Bill, currently at Stage 1 in Parliament. Children in Scotland's evidence to the Education Committee suggests that there should be formal links between Community Plans, SOAs and Children's Services Plans. In our view, the Bill provides an opportunity to make these much needed links and for the Scottish Government to look again at whether SOA targets/outcomes adequately cover the interests of children and young people.

16. The Bill also describes a "wellbeing framework" based on the Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) principles of Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included (SHANARRI). Our understanding is that there is to be a suite of indicators and measures to help demonstrate progress, based on SHANARRI principles and that these should be included in progress reports on delivery of children's services plans.

17. Children in Scotland considers that it would both sensible and feasible to use measures and indicators, based on the SHANARRI framework, as a foundation for reporting at locality level, aggregate such information to Community Planning Partnership level and then include it in national reporting eg through SOAs, which, ultimately, would feed into the National Performance Framework. This would provide "bottom up" performance information to aid direct service providers at locality level, local policy and planning partnerships, national government and Parliament in respect of assessing successful delivery of national outcomes, policy priorities and resource allocation.

18. If the SHANARRI indicators are well designed and measured consistently, this would ultimately provide the National Performance Framework with a wider range of more meaningful and relevant information on how children and young people are faring in Scotland.

19. Children in Scotland also believes that the Growing Up in Scotland research outcomes could serve as a useful input to the national outcomes set out in the NPF, again making better use of existing sources of information.

20. Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) is a large-scale and ongoing longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of several cohorts of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. The research covers key domains which are very relevant to the national outcomes in the NPF, including cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development, physical and mental health and wellbeing, childcare, education and employment, home, family, community and social networks, involvement in offending and risky behaviour.

Opportunity to rationalise and streamline indicators.

21. We suspect that many current performance and reporting requirements are linked to earlier, specific policies and strategies and they may not reflect the shift of focus towards prevention, early intervention and the early years.

22. We suggest, therefore, that the Scottish Government should take the opportunity to review the plethora of performance and other reporting information it currently gathers (and plans to gather in future) in respect of improving outcomes for children and young people. As matters stand, Children in Scotland would contend that there is a need for greater cohesion and scope for significant rationalisation which could save scarce human and financial resources that could be better used to support front line services and improve outcomes.

23. For example, we understand that an ongoing project, the Early Years Collaborative, is developing a new suite of stretch aims and targets, based around a quality improvement model. While Children in Scotland has always welcomed greater emphasis on the early years, we suggest that the Scottish Government should be invited to set out in detail how these new measures fit with GIRFEC/SHANARRI indicators, the indicators which underpin the Early Years Framework and the reporting requirements in the Children and Young People Bill. Our hope is that these could be rationalised and streamlined, rather than creating additional burdens on hard-pressed service providers.

24. There is also a major issue around the availability of robust baseline data to form the foundations from which progress can be monitored and the Scottish Government should ensure that it has sufficient baseline information to support improved indicators and measures in respect of improving outcomes for children and young people.

Links between NPF priorities and spending decisions.

25. Children in Scotland welcomes the policy intentions and rationale behind shifting resources towards prevention, early intervention and the early years, including the prospects of generating savings to the public purse in the short, medium and long terms. However, it seems to us that there is no consistent understanding or definition of what prevention and early intervention mean in practice, so we question how effective any attempt to categorise and quantify the allocation of resources would be.

26. In addition, it is very difficult to obtain information on how much is spent in Scotland on supporting children's services and to track trends. Local authority financial returns are one complex, source of information. Our understanding is that NHS spend on children and young people is almost impossible to identify, due to the way in which budgets are structured. Against this backdrop (coupled with the virtual removal of ring fenced budgets for local government), we suspect that it will be difficult for the Scottish Government and for Parliament to measure from a meaningful baseline whether there is a shift of resources towards the prevention and early intervention priorities.

27. Another factor which will conspire against shifting resources is that this initiative has come about at a time of severe pressures on public sector budgets and we know that local authorities and other providers are already struggling to meet their existing legal obligations to children and families. We consider that there is very little in the way of "slack" in the financial system which would allow a major shift of resources, while still ensuring that current statutory duties are met.

28. While the Scottish Government's Change Fund is a useful incentive, our partners have pointed out to us the dilemma they face in transferring increasingly scarce resources to meet revised priorities, particularly identification of the budgets which might be reduced and the consequences of doing so. For example, existing children and families with multiple, complex and challenging needs will still require extensive and expensive support over time and reduction or withdrawal of support could have very serious consequences for all concerned.

29. Given the serious financial conditions facing the public sector in Scotland, we suggest that policy makers, planners and practitioners need to take careful stock of current activities to ensure that they are delivering improved outcomes for children and families and value for money. Where there is spending on provision that is clearly failing to deliver, shutting down such activities and transferring resources into services and actions that have been proven to work, may be another option to free up human and financial capital. Diverting resources into prevention and early intervention priorities would certainly be welcome, but it is equally important to have common definitions, measures and indicators to ensure that such resources are delivering genuine and sustainable improvements to outcomes.

30. The desired transitions in resource terms will, in our view, take much longer to emerge and progress is likely to be slow and variable across Scotland. The consequence of this is likely to be that the improvement in outcomes for children and young people envisioned by the Scottish Government, and supported by Children in Scotland, will take longer to emerge. We are not advocating a shift away from the policy aims of prevention, early identification of problems and early intervention from the earliest years in a child's life, but offering something of a "reality check" in managing expectations.

Conclusion.

31. In conclusion, Children in Scotland supports the rationale and aims which underpin the National Performance Framework, but we can see considerable scope to enhance the range and quality of information on children and young people that feeds into it. In this submission, we offer suggestions which, we hope, might provide

more relevant and comprehensive information, while streamlining the means of reporting at local and national levels.

32. While we believe that it is too early to respond in detail to all the questions posed by the Finance Committee, we wish the Scottish Government, Scottish Parliament and the key national and local agencies who plan and deliver services for children and young people every success in making these ambitious and laudable changes to the ways in which services for children, young people and families are planned, provided and funded.