Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People

THE EARLY YEARS FRAMEWORK

SCOPING ITS IMPACT

Summary Report

Aline-Wendy Dunlop
School of Education
University of Strathclyde
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Aline-Wendy Dunlop
School of Education
University of Strathclyde
THE MAIN MESSAGES OF THE SCOPING STUDY

Key Statement: The Early Years Framework (EYF) provides a visionary ten year strategy for Scotland

Policy considerations
• A stronger national implementation approach is needed to achieve the EYF aims
• Scottish Government is responsible for national policy however it is no longer in a position to formulate local expectations yet a coherent mandated approach to early childhood is needed
• Local authority, health boards, social services and social justice leaders need to be well informed and convinced about the importance of investment in the early years
• If early years is to be a national priority there needs to be a much improved public understanding about why
• Improved knowledge of children’s early development and of the impact of early childhood experiences must inform research, policy and practice decisions

Resources
• Early years provision and intervention is known to improve outcomes in the longer term therefore there should be an expectation of dedicated funding for early years and family and community services
• There is an urgent need for pooling of resources from all sectors to create joint funding for the early years

For children and families
• All children have the right to a promising future: children’s rights must underpin all policy affecting children and young people
• Families and communities play the pivotal role in children’s development, learning and life chances – to work with children you have to work with parents
• Very young children’s and their parents’ mental health should be nurtured

For staff
• All staff at all levels of policy, practices, management and administration and in all sectors should be ‘very familiar’ with the EYF
• Specific continuing professional development (CPD) on implementation of the EYF is needed
• The EYF should be considered together with Getting It Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) to promote a holistic view of children and families
• The quality of early childhood services is directly related to the quality of the staff
• New opportunities need to be created for the participation and empowerment of children and families
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study
In April 2010 Tam Baillie, Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People commissioned a small-scale Scoping Study into the implementation of the Early Years Framework (EYF).

The Commissioner works to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people living in Scotland. Given that the aspiration of the EYF is to make transformational changes that will affect Scotland’s approach to the early years, resulting in long term improved outcomes for the life chances of children and young people, the Commissioner has a particular interest in how its implementation will affect children and young people.

Published in December 2008 the EYF provides the Scottish Government in partnership with COSLA with a ten year strategy now well into its second year of implementation. The transformational changes which the Framework aspires to achieve will take time, however at this relatively early stage of implementation there is an opportunity to consider the nature of the start and the effectiveness of processes.

This Summary Report presents the main messages emerging from the Scoping Study, reports the perceptions of a wide range of survey respondents on how practitioners, managers and services are responding to the implementation of the EYF and considers some preliminary key findings. These indicative findings will give a perspective on emerging issues around the EYF and will help also to highlight issues which will inform the strategic plan of Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People.

The main report provides further detail of research approaches, the full set of results and discussion of the challenges of implementation of the EYF in Scotland.

1.2 Aim of the *Early Years Framework* Scoping Study
The overall aim of the study is to provide the Commissioner with some preliminary findings on how local authorities are responding to the implementation of the EYF.

The Commissioner has a particular interest in the element in the EYF which promotes ‘the engagement and empowerment of children, families and communities’, which is linked to the Commissioner’s role to promote and safeguard the rights of children and young people living in Scotland.

Indeed one of the key principles which underpins the EYF places children at the centre:

“Effective approaches to early years and early intervention policy will contribute strongly to promoting and upholding children’s rights as defined by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and indeed those rights must underpin all policy for children.”

*(Early Years Framework, 2008, p7)*
The EYF is now well into its second year of implementation. While it is recognised the transformational changes which the EYF aspires to achieve will take time, it is approaching a point in its implementation when it is legitimate to ask questions about whether the change process is on track. It will be the nature and frequency of developments that will determine whether the ambition of transformational change can be seen to be underway. The three key areas for investigation are:

1. A general overview of implementation
2. Signs of change
3. Taking account of views of children and young people

1.3 Research approach
Six research questions and three main approaches to data gathering were employed:

1. What are the main purposes of the Early Years Framework?
2. What progress has been made with the implementation of the Early Years Framework at National and Local Government level?
3. What progress has been made with implementation of the Early Years Framework at the practice level?
4. What signs of change are emerging from the data?
5. What evidence is there of ‘engagement and empowerment of children, families and communities’?
6. What changes have come about as a result of the Early Years Framework Implementation?

Desk-top analysis
The desk-top analysis aimed to produce a brief summary of the current EYF’s stage of implementation and progress from available documents including the 32 local authorities’ Single Outcome Agreements (SOA).

Survey
A survey related to the key areas of investigation was circulated to key contacts and relevant partners, including for example members of NEYLAf (National Early Years Local Authority Forum), Community Planning Partnerships and the ADES network (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland). The survey was designed to be available as a paper survey and through an online survey tool (See Main Report, Annex 4 Research Instruments).
Interviews

A series of 12 semi-structured interviews were planned with a representative sample of early years’ workers or development officers in local authorities and in health services. The project timescale determined that the interviews would be conducted by telephone.

1.4 Ethical issues

The Scoping Study was granted Ethical Approval by the University of Strathclyde in accordance with its Code of Practice. Prospective participants were provided with sufficient information to allow them to make an informed decision about consenting to be involved. It was agreed that responses would be anonymised.
2 KEY FINDINGS

2.1 Desk top analysis

Initial scoping for a new early years policy began during the previous coalition Government in 2006, with increasing research evidence that suggested that the events in a child’s earliest years were crucial to their future life development. The SNP administration continued to consult, plan and formulate an early years policy in the latter part of 2007 and the early part of 2008, reflecting on the recommendations posed by a joint policy statement between the Scottish Government and COSLA on early years and early intervention (18 March 2008). Four task groups were created to investigate the themes of the framework, including: building parenting and family capacity; creating communities that provide a supportive environment for children and families; delivering integrated services that meet the needs of children and families; and developing a suitable workforce to support the framework (Scottish Government, 2010).

The Early Years Framework (EYF), part of a tripartite of social policies aimed at reducing social inequality, was launched in December 2008 (Equally Well and Achieving our Potential were launched earlier in 2008). Considering the importance of ensuring that children receive the ‘best start in life’, a key aspiration of the EYF is to break the cycle of social disadvantage, ensuring that everyone has the same opportunities to flourish and hence preventing the intergenerational nature of poverty in Scotland through improved life outcomes. In order to progress this agenda, EYF sets out a list of priorities for action that need to be taken forward in partnership over the next ten years, including short-, medium- and long-term actions. The key themes of approach are:

1. A new focus on supporting parents to help their children and help themselves
2. A new emphasis on the crucial birth to three period of a child’s life
3. Encouraging communities to become more engaged in supporting young children and their families
4. Strengthening universal early years services and increasing the skills of the workforce

Ten priorities, each with overlapping concerns, have been designed to transform Scotland’s approach to the early years, improving the life chances of children and young people.

The Concordat reached between the Scottish Government and COSLA supports decision making about services through the mechanism of Single Outcome Agreements (SOA). Local Authorities can therefore be understood to have ‘greater scope’ to tackle the ten priorities, or elements of transformational change, recommended by the EYF. The implementation of the EYF relies on partnership working between national and local government and on local decision making.
The majority of SOA are found to be generally unspecific about early years and a more positive view of early childhood which addresses play, prosocial behaviour, children with disabilities and children’s rights is needed, however local strategy and linked action plans are now being published. In an outcomes focused climate a scoping of these would provide further insight on implementation plans, including outcomes criteria which this study finds are a particular challenge to local authority staff.

The desktop analysis in the main report shows a push for more inclusive, holistic services, where service providers and professionals are engaged in more frequent and effective dialogue, and where their services are more accessible to those who need them. The synergy between GIRFEC (Getting it Right for Every Child) and the EYF has the potential to drive EYF implementation forward.

Scottish Government policy consistently emphasises the importance of the early years, of working with children and families and of a well qualified workforce that is able to deliver on policy in terms of universal services as well as early intervention through targeted services to reduce social inequality.

At the first Children’s Summit (Edinburgh, June 2010) there was a renewed emphasis on the importance of the EYF in improving outcomes for children for Scotland’s children and the announcement of a new dialogue on early years may begin to answer the desire for a stronger national steer at local level. Such leverage is required to support local prioritisation of the early years, particularly in terms of resource decisions.

There is a new focus in Scottish Government to create policy built on the increasingly robust international evidence base that makes a relationship between early years experiences and later outcomes across physical, emotional, social and cognitive aspects of development. The EYF captures a new commitment by Scottish Government to children and families from the earliest stage and is visible at local authority level in strategic terms. It is less easy to show which new practices are specifically related to the EYF. The evidence which follows suggests that for workers on the ground their efforts are a continuum of commitment to early years which has been given fresh impetus through a renewed focus on the very earliest years of children’s lives.
2.2 Survey Results

2.2.1 Respondents

There were 268 respondents to the survey from every Local Authority and Health Board area in Scotland. They included representatives from education, health (including speech and language therapy), community, social work and voluntary sector practitioners, managers and strategists from across disciplines. The majority were in post before the launch of the EYF. The largest sets of responses were from Education (178) and Health (51), with 18 responses from the voluntary sector, 6 from social services and 15 outwith these sectors. The range of staff reflects practitioners whose day-to-day work is directly with children and families, as well as those with a management, leadership or strategy function.

It should be noted that most of the 268 respondent group answered the Background Information and Section 1 (A general overview of implementation) of the survey. Section 2 (Signs of change) of the survey had 152 respondents overall, though numbers of responses per question varied according to the relevance of the question to the respondent and in Section 3 (Taking account of views of children and young people) there were less respondents with responses varying from 122 and 138 according to the question.

Given the small scale nature of this study, it is recognised that it would require a larger scale research project to effectively identify those responsible for all early years’ developments in all areas. The respondents in this survey, while a representative sample, can only provide a partial picture of the impact of the EYF.

2.2.2 Overview of implementation

The survey findings highlight levels of knowledge about implementation of the EYF to date, the kinds of initiatives being undertaken, the challenges inherent in implementing the EYF and the ways in which they could be helped to contribute to the EYF aspiration of reducing social inequalities.

The survey asked firstly about previous practice in terms of meeting the goals for children, families and the community before the advent of the EYF. A focus was given to which policies, frameworks or legislation respondents found most useful in informing their practice.

Before the publication of the EYF the most useful guidance for early childhood practitioners was the Curriculum Framework 3 to 5, The Child at the Centre and their own Local Authority Guidance. Prior to 2008, the majority had had opportunities to participate in continuing professional development (CPD), and opportunities for CPD on children’s health and wellbeing and children’s learning and development including play initiatives were the most frequently accessed. CPD opportunities in working with parents and consulting with children were less accessed.
The survey also asked about familiarity with the EYF. Overall, knowledge of the content of the EYF is mixed. Just over a fifth (22.4%) of survey respondents are ‘very familiar’ with the content of the EYF and a further 38.4% are ‘familiar’. Despite this combined figure of 61%, a further 32% of respondents are only ‘somewhat familiar’ and 7% ‘not at all familiar’: for effective implementation of a flagship policy the level of knowledge needs to be improved. However, over 90% of respondents do report having some knowledge of the Framework, so it is possible that a growing number of professionals in these workforce groupings are becoming aware of this policy in their daily practice.

Even with 61% being ‘familiar’ or ‘very familiar’ with the EYF, for effective implementation of a flagship policy the level of knowledge needs to be improved. CPD could be instrumental in this process and is known to be instrumental in professional change. Over 80% of respondents had CPD opportunities but only 39% had been able to access CPD about the EYF. A question is raised as to whether the early childhood workforce is motivated directly by policy or is indeed knowledgeable about policy, therefore there is a need to ensure that all practitioners are knowledgeable about the strategy that their work contributes to. Without such knowledge the EYF aspiration to close the gap between outputs and outcomes may remain an aspiration.

This raises questions also about the knowledge of the EYF beyond this sample, given that only 22% are ‘very familiar’ with it and 39% had had access to related CPD. This knowledge of what is widely perceived to be an aspirational agenda is essential to reinvigorate services, bring new strategic direction and provide leverage to improve what is offered to children.

Furthermore, practice initiatives may not always be clearly linked to the meeting of policy. Given that we have found strong engagement (22% being ‘very familiar’) with the EYF documentation to be relatively low, it is not surprising to find that practice developments are contributing to the EYF priorities. Individual practitioners however are not necessarily making these connections, a point that is borne out by the gap between strategy views and practitioner views in some of the interviews reported in the case study section. Therefore as such, the relationship between knowledge of the EYF and focused action to meet the transformational change agenda needs to be strengthened.
2.2.3 Signs of change

The Scoping Study has provided a very focused look at how people working in the field of early childhood are relating to the EYF. Signs of change in current practices provide important evidence of moves towards implementation of the EYF.

In considering EYF influences on aspects of positive change in Local Authority areas, with the proviso that all change builds on what was there before, survey responses indicate that early childhood services are taking a more holistic view of children and the need for collaboration than was the case previously. A good majority, 78%, (91 out of 129 of respondents) of the workforce is tuned into this. This finding is borne out by the various responses throughout the survey on the need for collaboration in order to meet aspirations for children and families and that this venture can no longer be viewed as the preserve of any particular service. GIRFEC also promotes such an approach.

Collaboration in practice is therefore seen as a ‘good’ but the challenges of successful joint working need to be well understood, as does understanding of the benefits and what is involved in commitment to such work. Effective collaborations are based on relationships: this may be the main difference between strategic and operational collaborations. The current policy context is demanding collaboration through universal services, infrastructure developments and specialist projects: communication, consultation, shared understandings and joint planning are all necessary ingredients of such an approach. ¹

When asked about plans for new initiatives, 20% of those who responded to this question had plans under way and 33% were in the planning stage. Just under half of respondents (48%) appear to be less engaged with the change agenda with 30% not currently planning any new initiatives and a further 18% who ‘don’t know’. The examples of new initiatives were reported by the whole sweep of respondents, rather than any specific group. It could be speculated that lack of funding, the existence of well-established core services or innovation fatigue may have limited the potential for change. Experience of the commitment and enthusiasm that dominates this sector suggests that it is more likely that lack of engagement with change comes back either to a lack of knowledge of both local and national policy initiatives, or to a sense that work doesn’t start or finish in tune to policy, but is a gradual and more responsive process.

As we have seen, most respondents had reported being ‘very familiar’ or ‘familiar’ (61%) with the content of the EYF with a further 32% being ‘somewhat familiar’. When asked if additionally they were aware of the EYF being adopted in their establishments, 111 out of 152

respondents (73%) said they were. However 15% were not aware of adoption of the EYF and 12% did not know whether or not it had been adopted. Therefore 27% of these respondents could be deemed to be unaware of implementation of EYF: this may be interpreted as a need for increasing levels of awareness of Scottish Government policy amongst people working with young children, though not necessarily an indicator of lack of action.

In terms of the influence of the framework on their own practices, over half of 152 responding to this question feel the EYF is influencing their practice considerably, a further 30% report ‘a little’ influence, whilst 11% say it is not influencing their practice at all. The publication of Local Authority EYF strategies and action plans will hopefully make this flagship policy more accessible to practitioners at a local level (e.g. Edinburgh, 2010). With fewer than a fifth of respondents saying that the EYF influences their practice ‘a great deal’ this type of guidance will be a key driver for change.

Thus it would seem that whilst there are many developments these may not always be strategic, but rather in practice terms may simply be ongoing, whilst having a good enough fit with strategy objectives. There is considerable activity, but there remains an unanswered question about how much shared direction there is and how this may link to outcomes.

**Practice initiatives**

The EYF aspires to reduce inequalities through working with the youngest children and their families in order to make a difference.

The top priority respondents accorded to the EYF elements of transformational change both in their own practice and the approach of their establishment or service was to ‘services that meet the needs of children and families’, followed by ‘putting quality at the heart of service delivery and more effective collaborations’. The two lowest rated elements of transformational change, both in terms of individual and institutional practice, were ‘breaking cycles of poverty, inequality and poor outcomes in and through early years’ and ‘simplifying and streamlining delivery’.

The main areas of transformational change attracting new initiatives were

- A focus on engagement and empowerment of children, families and communities
- Helping children, families and communities to secure outcomes for themselves

Respondents were asked to give brief details of an EYF initiative which they believe demonstrates good practice. A wide range of initiatives were identified by respondents and are discussed fully in the main report.

Initiatives were often given titles as well as being described in terms of the target group – parents, babies, peer support, under twos, early intervention and transition to school being such examples. Many of the initiatives had common elements and there was a sense in which
the same purposes were being achieved in many different ways – 55 out of 97 (43%) of respondents said these initiatives were not innovative - this repetition suggests a need to evaluate approaches, at least locally, if not nationally in order to generate data on what works, for whom and in which contexts. Strategic approaches, building capacity and training were also included: these overlap with the wider challenges identified for implementation of the EYF and also contribute to the drivers that bring focus to the many initiatives underway so that the effect of EYF focused work can begin to be understood in terms of longer term benefit for children and families.

Reducing Social Inequalities

When asked about approaches that contribute to the aspiration to reduce social inequalities, and those which empower children, families and communities, play was highly valued by respondents as an empowerment approach, but much less valued for its role in reducing social inequalities. The examples offered here include the play programme, Peers Early Education partnership (PEEP), Bookstart Rhyme time and Learning Together Through Play and are reported in a way that suggests they provide powerful pedagogical opportunities for change in that parents and their children participate together. Successful involvement is expected to be both empowering and to begin to combat some of the parenting issues that run alongside social disadvantage. Their incremental value may be relatively small but they make a starting point to engagement of families.

When ranking proposed ways to reduce social inequalities (drawn from the EYF), respondents did not give ‘taking account of children’s own interests’ a high ranking. It is essential that observing and listening to young children in order to engage with their interests is understood in terms of consequent empowerment.

2.2.4 Taking account of views of children and young people

The importance of collaboration is well understood but issues remain about practitioner understanding of empowerment. One particular policy aspiration has been ‘a focus on engagement and empowerment of children, families and communities...[in the way] that services engage with them, in terms of patterns of delivery, and relationships with the people delivering those services’ (Scottish Government, 2008:17).

The expression of these ideas in the EYF moves away from any notion that somehow ‘empowerment’ is in the gift of professionals. One consequence of empowerment can be understood therefore to be about securing outcomes: here outcomes can be assumed to be improvements, change and a better quality of life. While just over half (54%) of the respondents were aware of initiatives that in their view might be both engaging and

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empowering for children and families the remaining 46% were either unaware of any such initiative or uncertain whether existing initiatives contributed to children and families’ empowerment.

Given that the literature shows a strong relationship between help giving practices and personal control, this is an aspect of professional awareness that must be further developed. The most empowering approaches were felt by respondents to be:

- Ensuring services encompass play, learning, social relationships and emotional and physical wellbeing
- Promoting the right of all young children to environments and services which offer a holistic approach to meeting their needs

A lack of ability in responses to cite initiatives that enable consultation and participation also suggests limited awareness of empowering initiatives or of viewing empowerment as a possible element in a range of activities. The responses give a flavour of the kind of work and value placed on consultation and may indicate a need for raising awareness of the value of consultation and how to go about it.

In line with the EYF, 88 out of 118 respondents (75%) were aware of a greater focus on working in partnership with families. This is coupled with 86 out of 122 (71%) of respondents’ awareness of a greater focus within existing services on the development of parenting skills and 82 out of 114 (72%) being aware of a positive change in terms of consulting with parents.

The EYF promotes change in working practices with parents and the importance of promoting the rights of the child, one of which is to be able to express a view on matters which affect them. To achieve these aspirations it would seem essential that CPD opportunities are offered in this area. Only 40% of the sample had been able to access general CPD on working with parents and on consulting with children – both arguably priority areas for the EYF and emphasising the need for a higher take-up.

### 2.2.5 Wider challenges of implementation

The wider challenges of implementing the EYF were identified by a number of respondents. There were a number of key areas highlighted including, policy considerations and resources, in addition to challenges for staff working to implement the EYF and delivering outcomes for children and families with overall prioritising of early years. Not least “developing a shared ownership of the change agenda” was identified as a priority for respondents.

A number of strategic policy drivers in relation to the EYF were identified as being central to implementation alongside local practice links between the EYF and GIRFEC, *Equally Well* and *Achieving our Potential*. Within local policies and structures, having a child and family focus and an understanding of transformational change were important as drivers for change.
at a local level. Budget constraints, funding for initiatives and sustaining services equitably were also mentioned, with concerns about “impending cuts to public services will inevitably mean that priority is given to crisis led services”. (Interview transcriptions)

For staff it was also about training and capacity building, joined up or collaborative working. For children and families, respondents identified importance of supporting vulnerable families, providing measures which would enhance early intervention, providing additional support for learning (ASL), looking at curricular content as well as encouraging parental participation, working with young people and support for play and communication.

The two most important aspects of positive change since the introduction of the EYF in Local Authority engagement with children and families were identified by survey respondents as:

- Taking a ‘whole child’ approach by working collaboratively with other professionals and services
- A greater focus on working in partnership with families
3 LOCAL AUTHORITY CASE STUDIES

Herein this summary report we draw on interviews in each of the selected Local Authorities to illustrate the range of issues and strategies underway. Patterns emerged across the four Local Authorities and it is likely that such patterns represent the situation of other Local Authority areas given the spread of interviews conducted and their representative nature.

Each of the four Local Authorities targeted for interviews in this Scoping Study has taken a strategic approach as follows:

- In Local Authority A, the Area Education Officer reports that their authority is focusing on three elements of transformational change in the shorter term – these are a coherent approach; empowering the local community and using the strength of universal services to deliver prevention and early intervention.

- Local Authority B has taken a pioneering approach to policy and service implementation and sees across all life stages both the EYF and GIRFEC as helpful drivers in that.

- In Local Authority C where we spoke to the Senior Children’s Services Officer and the GIRFEC Coordinator, Children and Community Services there has been a total review of services bringing about a sea change in thinking about the right supports in the right places at the right time – a philosophy clearly underpinned by GIRFEC.

- Local Authority D has also undergone extensive re-structuring, but is working hard to maintain coherence in policy direction: in the light of budgetary constraints this idea of coherence in services has replaced former thinking about integration of services.

As reported, each of the more senior strategy staff in each of the selected Local Authorities drew attention to notions of change, to the absence of direct centralised requirements which might have brought more authority to developments, and the difficulties of pushing for changes in a more “hands off” world. Provision of resources came up as an issue in all authorities and this linked to the need for a focused action plan. All those interviewed were demonstrably knowledgeable and committed to the early years, understanding the long term benefits of investment and articulate in their hopes for change.

Each case study Local Authority was engaged in developing their early years strategy as part of bringing local strategy into line with national agreements. Two of the Local Authorities had dedicated management of early years services and two emphasised the benefits of managing early years as part of a wider services agenda.

Organisational structures and leadership commitment were recognised as challenging in each of the selected local authorities. It was felt that a stronger national directive was needed in order for budget holders to commit to the importance of sustaining early years investment in taxing economic times. Planning was going ahead, but all respondents were watchful and in some cases it was clear that a need for advocacy for the early years was required. Work in
the early years was also family work and each selected local authority was developing both strategy and projects to work in distinctive ways with the most vulnerable children and families, whilst balancing this with a commitment to universal services.

Staff in each selected Local Authority were strongly in favour of a holistic view of children and families and expressed positive views on the importance of consultation. Consultation with children seemed challenging the younger they were, but in several cases there was a conviction that the only difficulty lay in having an appropriate approach and that even very young children’s views could be represented through sensitive adults who were able to learn by observing as well as listening to children.

From these four Local Authorities the message was clear that challenges remain. These include budget management, the pooling of resources and approaches, joined up working, understanding of transformational change, understanding and using key drivers for change such as CPD, closing the circle through work with families and with young people, and making local practice links between the Early Years Framework, Equally Well (Scottish Government, 2008), and Achieving our Potential (Scottish Government, 2008), alongside the Getting It Right for Every Child approach.
4 DISCUSSION

A rich data set has been produced from this Scoping of the Implementation of the *Early Years Framework* (EYF).

Overall respondents and interviewees have emphasised that these are challenging times. In particular, the perceived absence of central guidance on implementation has been at the very least a challenge, and for some a threat to implementation.

There is a need for much greater pooling of resources driven by shared agendas to make a difference for children, both for their present experience but also what such approaches could yield in the longer term for individual health, wellbeing, education, personal resourcefulness, empowerment and happiness. Also in economic terms there is the potential that investing early could reduce school drop out, resist ill health, support families, reduce dependence on criminal justice systems and build the social capital of children, families and the country.

There is little doubt that the workforce has taken on board Government aspirations in terms of the key themes of the EYF. The EYF has brought a new political emphasis to work in the early years. The balance is shifting to helping families to help themselves. People talk about refocusing and being clearer about their purpose and whilst costs and cost effectiveness are talked about people seem to be arguing the importance of a coherent approach to the early years that makes the best of pooled finances. How to achieve for children and families is differently construed in different parts of Scotland and there is an abiding fear that non-statutory services are an easy target for savings. With a national effort to work with the four key themes of the EYF, listed below, there is a pressing need for knowledgeable champions to make strong and informed arguments about why the early years of people’s lives matter so much.

*Early Years Framework - Key themes*

1. A new focus on supporting parents to help their children and help themselves

2. A new emphasis on the crucial birth to three period of a child’s life

3. Encouraging communities to become more engaged in supporting young children and their families

4. Strengthening universal early years services and increasing the skills of the workforce

The survey returns provide strong evidence of a range of efforts being made in the best interests of children.

The endeavours of all are important, but the arguments for coordination and coherence of effort have surfaced. However well intentioned and successful the local effort, the direction of travel needs to be clear: people need to sense where their contribution fits into the larger picture. It is a challenging agenda. The survey results suggest repetition of new initiatives in
a number of areas, and yet it may be that this local level activity is exactly what communities need in order to become strong and healthy.

That respondents have logged on to share what they are doing is one illustration of the commitment and energy of people who work in early childhood: the richness of what they are sharing suggests that the survey has captured the attention of the protagonists of early childhood: people who are familiar and confident in their work, and this raises questions about the knowledge of the EYF beyond this sample, given that only 22% are ‘very familiar’ with it and 39% had had access to related CPD. This knowledge of what is widely perceived to be an aspirational agenda is essential to reinvigorate services, bring new strategic direction and provide leverage to improve what is offered to children.

Reading policy documents is one matter, knowing why they are important is another. Each of the people we interviewed in strategic roles were convinced of the importance of focusing on early childhood and through this focus to reach the wider community at all life stages. It was frequently said that there is a real need for people in the most senior council positions to embrace and to understand the importance and the potential of early childhood to achieving our national and local priorities.

Inter-agency working is clearly visible in the survey data. This is also acknowledged by the interviewees, who see a next stage in collaboration as requiring joint planning, joint or pooled budgets and coherence in service provision rather than integration. Each of the interviewees emphasised the importance of well-trained staff with some emphasis placed on knowledge of early childhood, long term impacts and skills to plan and implement work in the immediate, medium and long term. Many interview responses were marked by the recognition that ‘intervention’ is not a one off, but is needed to augment what has become known as ‘universal services’. This dual challenge of providing well for all and specifically for some, especially where persistent inter-generational issues and persistent poverty co-exist in communities is proving really testing on planners. Those with designated strategic roles and a knowledge of early childhood, families and communities, seem best placed to develop action plans.

These plans need to be informed at three levels – overall aspiration for changes in life chances, strategic action plans that demonstrate understanding of the journey to change outcomes, and practical coordinated plans across services underpinned by well planned use of budgets. Childhood is pervasive and all budgets should have a child focused element. Questions have been raised through the Scoping Study about training and capacity building for all practitioners and parents.

Work on the EYF is not limited to early childhood services: in considering vulnerable families, parental participation and effective communication a wider response beyond the early childhood sector into primary and secondary schooling; social work; health; community and adult support services is needed. Though people working in these sectors may be more
oriented to *Equally Well* (Scottish Government, 2008), *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2007), *Achieving our Potential* (Scottish Government, 2008) and *A Mentally Flourishing Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2009), for example, the interrelationship of flagship policies affecting each area of expertise becomes more of a priority. Joint training across sectors and disciplines, working closely with other professionals, sharing information about children and families within and between services were seen by respondents to support the aspiration of sustaining services equitably. The EYF may offer a role in bridging traditional ‘silos’- a question on this knowledge across policy may be an area for further research.

The specific knowledge held by distinct groups of professionals raises issues about what is common and what needs to be shared. Professional disciplines often carry their own vocabulary. In Scottish policy documents as in early childhood practice there is an increasing dependence of the terminology of ‘services’, ‘workforce’ and ‘outcomes’ – and maybe not enough talk of children and childhood and the less measurable. Might we develop a vocabulary that is more relevant to early childhood whilst still espousing the early investment model that brings an improvement in life chances? A recommendation for future study would be to look at practices across policies and across disciplines – respondents in this study were mainly from early childhood settings with some health, community and social service representation. Nevertheless the articulation of what children’s services should offer tends to be based on needs rather than rights and although many of the initiatives shared were directed at children, the rights that most concern adults seem to be linked to protection more than to participation. The value placed on consultation - but the relative paucity of approaches that give children a voice - needs to be considered in terms of pre-birth to three guidance and in the curriculum. The four capacities identified in *Curriculum for Excellence* have a particular role to play: children need every opportunity to develop their personal capacity and identity. Empowerment through play and through exercising choice were highly rated elements of transformational change and this may indicate a need for raising awareness of the value of consultation, what this means for the youngest children and how to go about it.

The Local Authorities targeted for interviews emphasised structural changes, building on existing good practice, rejecting the tendency to make existing work fit but reflecting and taking a needed and radical new look and strategic leadership. The gap between developing a robust strategy based on sound working knowledge of the early childhood field and the non-mandatory nature of so much work with young children and families provides scope for cuts. This Scoping Study reinforces the case for a coherent mandated approach to early childhood.

The need to consider how children are conceptualised across services is integral to the successful implementation of the EYF. The disjunction between aspiration and what is measurable invades management agendas for services. On the ground it is evident that there are many initiatives and the potential for success – how can these day-to-day successes accumulate to make a difference for children and families in the longer term – what do they
add up to? This tension about being able to measure effects came through the interviews: there was an interest in soft indicators rather than just hard measures. Advocating ways of understanding effects in the longer term - over time – may result in appropriate research into demonstrating the outcome based effectiveness of implementation of the EYF.

In this study, respondents considering elements of transformational change, gave the lowest priority overall to ‘breaking cycles of poverty, inequality and poor outcomes in and through early years’. However, given what is known about levels of child poverty and inequality within Scotland, this remains a real challenge for implementation of the EYF. The Growing up in Scotland (GUS) survey reported in April 2010 on issues of persistent poverty in Scotland’s child population (Scottish Government, 2010). Save the Children claim that 9% of Scottish children are living in severe poverty (Save the Children 2010). Most recently, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation poverty monitoring report of 2010 (Anushree Parekh et al Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion in Scotland 2010.) has set the Scottish Child Poverty figures at 26%.
5. FINAL COMMENT

This Scoping Study into the implementation of the Early Years Framework (EYF) is timely. It has illustrated progress in implementation alongside a contradictory lack of familiarity with its content and its aims. It is necessary to forge clear links between driving policy frameworks (Early Years Framework, Equally Well and Achieving our Potential as well as Getting it Right for Every Child) so that the different and complementary disciplines may work effectively together. Work currently under way on the core skills for the Children’s Workforce should help here to pinpoint where collaboration can be at its most effective, core common skills may equip universal services adequately but specialist knowledge will remain essential for a significant proportion of our child population and the population’s families and communities.

There is a new understanding of childhood that recognises that children bring much more to relationships, to the developmental process and to learning than we used to give them credit for: it is in theirs and our own best interests that this contribution is recognised, respected and fostered. Their creativity, competence and companionship needs the opportunity to flourish. Consequently longer term monitoring of the implementation of our visionary EYF will be part of ensuring that the rights of children are met. This reinforces a principle to promote and uphold children’s rights, a key aspect of the work of the office of Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People and a principle of the Early Years Framework.