

Family Support

In South Ayrshire #Keepthepromise



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Introduction

Between 2017 and 2020, the Independent Care Review heard the experiences over 5,500 care experienced infants, children, young people, adults, and members of the paid and unpaid workforce had of Scotland's 'care system', and their vision for what needed to change. This vision was set out in 'The Promise' which reflected what was heard and detailed the foundations that Scotland's care for its children and families must be built on:



Voice: Children must be listened to and meaningfully and appropriately involved in decision-making about their care, with all those involved properly listening and responding to what children want and need. There must be a compassionate, caring, decision-making culture focussed on children and those they trust



Family: Where children are safe in their families and feel loved they must stay – and families must be given support together to nurture that love and overcome the difficulties which get in the way.



Care: Where living with their family is not possible, children must stay with their brothers and sisters where safe to do so and belong to a loving home, staying there for as long as needed.



People: The children that Scotland cares for must be actively supported to develop relationships with people in supported to listen and be compassionate in their decision-making and care.



Scaffolding: Children, families and the workforce must be supported by a system that is there when it is needed. The scaffolding of help, support and accountability must be ready and responsive when it is required.

Background

South Ayrshire has made a commitment to embed ['The Promise'](#) across practice, policy, planning and commissioning, this includes.

- Doing all we can to keep children with their families.
- Increasing the support for families, based in the communities where they live.
- Mitigating the impacts of poverty for South Ayrshires children, families, and communities
- Ensuring that intensive family support is available, proactive, and characterised by the **10 family support principles** outlined on p3:

10 family support principles

- Community Based
- Responsive and Timely
- Work with Family Assets
- Empowerment and Agency
- Flexible
- Holistic and Relational
- Therapeutic
- Non-Stigmatising:
- Patient and Persistent]
- Underpinned by Children's Rights

Aim

This report is intended to highlight the views of a core group of people who have all used Childrens Health Care and Justice services for their experiences to shape South Ayrshires family support service moving forward

Target Groups and Numbers

Our aim was to speak to a small sample of people who had used services. We spoke to 16 people ages ranging from 18-60+years. Participants with care experience had experience of adoption, foster care, kinship care residential care and of being looked after at home. The parents we spoke to included people who had adopted children, foster carers, and parents who had experience of receiving family support from a range of services across the statutory and voluntary sector. One online focus group involved only people who had received support from Aberlour family support. General participation was supported by members of South Ayrshire Champions Board team.

Approach and Methods

The consultation took place over 3 online focus groups (13 participants). Telephone interviews took place with 3 additional participants. All conversations used the ten principles of intensive family support (listed above) as a guide. One online group and all telephone interviews were noted. Two online groups were recorded with participants permission, these recordings were later transcribed to allow direct quotes to be used in this report.

Findings

Consultation findings have been grouped together under each of the 10 family support principles. Direct quotes from participants have been used wherever possible to reflect people's views and experiences.

Community Based

Most participants had experienced family support within their own home however there was a consensus that support would feel more 'community based' if services were more integrated and practitioners had a better knowledge of community resources. The formality of the process surrounding family support was seen by many as a barrier.

"She [family support worker] came to us and helped us get a really nice house in a really nice area and it's so much more than just a house it's my neighbours, it's my garden - she knew that."

"Where is the resource out in the community, any council service especially social work has never felt like a community service to me it's too formal for a start. You can be in a school; you can even be in a community centre but if your process is really formal referrals and all that then you're just kidding that you're accessible"

"Most services including family support seem to parachute in. I grew up in Glasgow had to move to foster care in South Ayrshire because there weren't many places available, so here I am 1 hour away from my home traveling to school traveling to see my gran. When I turned 16 my train ticket tripled in price, I remember feeling really worried about not being able to afford to see my family"

Responsive and Timely

This principle generated much discussion. Most participants felt that the right support hadn't reached them soon enough if at all. Many spoke of having to search for support while others spoke of things getting to crisis point and families at breaking point before support was offered. Without exception every participant felt that to be effective family support services must work beyond 5pm into evenings and at weekends. There is a perception that the term 'out of hours' implies inconvenience. Many spoke of avoiding using out of hours at all costs both because of the feeling of failure associated with asking for help and because they didn't feel comfortable relaying their situation to a stranger.

"I didn't know I could self-refer to family support if I'd known that I'd have referred my family right at the start because I'd have taken all of the help I could when social work got involved with us. Why don't social workers tell us what is available around us in our communities"

"I didn't always feel listened to we would have benefited from mental health support for our son and professional help to manage some of his behaviours I feel quite let down by education and social work I was asking for the support, but it didn't come."

"I don't think I got the right support at the right time no one believed what was going on. We had no food, but it looked ok when workers came to the door. I got fed at school even then it took services a few years to realise and that's too late"

"The system doesn't support people to provide the right help at the right time, the working hours don't support that"

"This should never be a 9-5 job how can it be you could be the best worker in the world but if you're not there when someone needs you before 9am or after 5pm then what good are you really going to do"

"I and lots of people I know are put off phoning and out of hours service it's too impersonal, they don't know you and you have to start your story from scratch then they send someone out the next day. I wouldn't phone for support if I could wait until the next day I phone because I need the support now"

"We shouldn't even call it an out of hours service we all live our lives 24 hours a day whether social work is involved or not. **There is no out of hours**"

"I feel like a failure if I have to ask for support out of hours"

"I can phone Lucy and I know she will get back to me if she can't talk to me right there and then she will let me know and will always get back – that's good enough for me"

"It's like doing things to people when support comes too late it has been left for too long"

"I feel like you have to wait to crisis point to get family support that you haven't asked for. It's too far down the line so families aren't in a place to have a say"

Work with Family Assets

Participants recognised how affirming it is when workers recognise and name their strengths, it builds confidence and builds bonds. Some participants felt that statutory services particularly struggled to see the person behind the 'presenting problem' and as a result made many assumptions which impacted on the whole family.

"I think my workers didn't realise that I was happy to take all the help I could get. I think they assumed that I wouldn't want any extra support and that they were all that I needed. If they knew me better, they'd realise that we needed some extra support for our family right at the very start when we were under pressure"

"I've had involvement with Barnardo's they recognised my strengths I remember them defending me saying I was a great mum when my health visitor was critical of me, that felt great."

"I'm not sure services see who I truly am behind what they see as the parent who needs help, if they did, they might be able to build on all the things I'm getting right rather than criticising what I'm doing wrong"

Empowerment and Agency

Participants valued support workers who were authentic, clear, honest, fair, and straight talking. Many felt that knowing what was expected of them and what they could expect in return was empowering and meaningful. This in turn motivated many to feel more engaged. Unclear expectations and changing positions harboured mistrust which only served to add to the stress families experienced.

"She [Family Support Worker] has been honest with me straight talking and fair. I can respect that"

"One worker helped my family to make positive change she arranged that I got a tutor because school was too hard, she spoke really honestly to my dad, and it helped him see how to make the best decision"

"The goal posts seem to always change, and I don't get to set any of these goalposts and certainly haven't ever had any notice when the goal posts are going to move"

Flexible

When services were able to take time, really get to know the family at a pace that responded to the family's needs then there was more chance of the service feeling flexible. When services were seen as flexible, they were also seen as non-judgemental and as a support that eased the pressure of family life. Family supports that were closely linked to social work provision were viewed as the least flexible as participants felt that they worked to a statutory timeframe and agenda rather than responded to the needs of the families they work with.

"I'm not sure family support should be so closely linked with social work, now that I have family support from Aberlour I feel the pressure is off a bit. They treat me like a human being they don't judge me and force me to take part. They have taken their time and have been patient with me. Now I don't keep myself to myself I join in family days out with Aberlour, and I feel better for taking part. It's good for me and my daughter."

"Kibble is the best organisation I've worked with their family support was phenomenal gave me and my son space and support. I felt like we were in it together and not judged. We were both included in a range of different ways. I felt like they really took notice of us and listened to us. There was one person as a point of contact weekly emails and informal chat whenever I went up there, so we got to know each other."

"I not sure that services know what other services do or even teams know what each other does. This shows when you get told to go to one service then they bounce you back to another service"

"They [services] think they know what each other does but they don't, and we're left going round in circles"

"What if we actually had a list of where support was available, and we decided where we should go"

Holistic and Relational

All participants recognised the value of trusting relationships. Many spoke of supports that only focused on an aspect of their parenting skills or a particular area of their life rather than taking holistic approach. A lack of time was seen as a barrier to relationship-based practice. Unrealistic timeframes imposed on families only added to the stress they experienced and had a detrimental impact on their family life.

"I'm not sure I was valued or trusted enough the timescales we were given to make changes were unrealistic a few days and over the weekend to move out of the house. We were a family already under pressure this just added to it."

"Because of the bad relationship I had with the second Social Worker we had I've found it a bit harder to trust our third worker. She really does seem alright but I'm wary. If my family support worker was my main worker, then I'd be much more likely to open up and build better relationships because I think they're more down to earth and supportive of me."

Therapeutic

Time and the right space were recognised as a requirement for support to feel therapeutic. Too many rules caused mistrust and there was a genuine fear from parents of getting things so wrong that they might lose their children. Those who had experienced therapeutic support, through support groups and other good quality support were able to articulate how liberating and healing it was to be able to open up. The language we use around family support can be counter intuitive and supports a problem based 'fix it' rather than therapeutic/enabling culture.

"To feel supported people, need to be given time, they need time to invest in each other they need space where there's no judgement and that's not so full of rules that they're scared they'll put a foot wrong"

"Here's me a big football man I don't talk - and once I got to the [support] group I just poured my heart out I needed it"

"Can we look at some of the words ...crisis intervention ...intensive family support, it makes me feel like I'm a problem before we even start"

Non-Stigmatising

Many participants felt judged and stigmatised and when this happened, they felt criticised and were less likely to open up and connect with workers. Listening believing and understanding all constituted practice which was non -stigmatising and which laid the foundation for a good relationship.

"There's something about feeling Judged the whole time, a bit of support and recognition that being a parent is really hard would take the edge off this – we should remember this and in an ideal world support and check in would keep going not to always assess parenting or whatever but just to stay connected in"

"I got on really well with 2 workers the first worker I felt that they didn't judge me, were good at listening weren't sacred to have direct conversations and treated me with respect"

"I have had 3 social workers over the space of 6 years and have been referred to a service for family support I've felt judged criticised and unable to speak the truth for fear of being further judged or information carried to others."

Patient and Persistent

The focus group discussions highlighted the importance of patience and a gentle persistence when building trusting relationships and affecting positive change. Those who hadn't experienced this felt things were left unresolved and found themselves reflecting on what if services had tried that bit harder.... got me on a different day.... had a slightly different conversation with my mum. This was particularly hard for some of the young people who took part to speak about. Others felt that the system was neither patient or persistent and that the revolving door of referral processes and signposting from service to service was exhausting.

"With the [Aberlour] family support service, they are just really patient you've no idea the difference this makes I don't feel judged and I'm a better person and parent because I'm not on edge"

"My stepdad and my mum had addiction issues and never got the support that they needed. The only support I remember was the police breaking down the doors to get to us. I'm not blaming services for this but if someone stuck with them and kept coming back and back and back again maybe the outcome would have been different."

“It feels like I’m always asking for help and that makes me feel like I’m failing. What is the point if it’s not a mutual exchange and there’s no reciprocity of support but instead, I’m going through a referral ‘maze’ every time I ask for support. Why is that necessary?”

Underpinned by Children’s Rights

Those who had received support as children spoke of feeling invisible and disconnected from family support. They didn’t understand at the time what family support was and the service was lost to them in the plethora of services around them. Many recognised that if their voice was to be heard then they had to be prepared to repeat their story time and time again to a range of professionals. Some felt that even then the adults around them were taken more seriously.

“It was just another worker to me social worker, support worker, family worker, what’s the difference I was too worried to think about that”

“Any family support worker has to make sure that they really listen to children and dig beyond what’s presented to them that takes time and trust and for the worker to believe the child and for the child to know they’re believed”

“I remember a lot of people coming in and out just before I came into care, but I can’t remember their roles and they didn’t make much of an impression on me as a child. I remember feeling so scared through the process of coming into care. If I had constant support just for me this would have helped me so much more.”

“Even though people wanted to help me I wasn’t taken seriously I was just a child and adults were listed to so much more. My mum used to make up stories to keep services at a distance and this worked.”

Conclusion and Key Messages

Those who took part in the consultation did so with great insight and a desire to affect positive change. Many reflected on some of the most difficult times in their life to support South Ayrshire to design a family support service that provides the right support at the right time. Participants were able to describe good support with good outcomes in all cases good relationships were seen as the bedrock of success. Voluntary sector partners were identified as most nurturing and patient and flexible in their approach. For many the connection to social work is viewed as a barrier for statutory family support services, as is the lack of choice of worker or opportunities that was associated with statutory provision. The need to operate beyond 5pm into evenings and weekends was identified as crucial for any family support service moving forward. The need to get alongside the family and offer support early before things get to crisis point was also identified as essential.

Recommendations

- Family support should operate from **community locations that work for families**. These locations/venues should not be connected to statutory services alone a range of venues should be known and available in each of south Ayrshires 6 localities to offer families choice
- Intensive family support services in South Ayrshire must operate **out with a Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm approach**. There must be no concept of an 'out of hours' service all participants without exception identified this as one of the major changes required
- The starting point of any family support must always be to look at what is working well for the family and really listening to **what children and their families say they need** to help them grow rather than fitting into what the system and services currently offer.
- To be effective a family support service must enable families to **have a say about the people who provide them with support**. The service should think 'South Ayrshire wide' and align more clearly with voluntary sector provision and peer support opportunities should be explored and expanded.
- Investing time to **get to know each family** is the key to offering support which is **flexible** and **authentic**.
- Too many people receiving family support in South Ayrshire currently experience **a number of services** all addressing **specific, isolated, and individual** issues. This compounds stress and adds even more complexity to the situation. We must recognise that the likelihood of success is not about the intervention, but the **quality of relationship** and South Ayrshire must place greater emphasis on relationship building as the bedrock of support.
- South Ayrshire has to work harder to ensure that services understand each other and their access points. When a range of services are working with one family we must question why. We must also **listen** to the **family** and recognised that they can **identify** who is best placed to **connect** with them.
- The promise identifies that **Family plans** must incorporate the **child's plan** (and the needs of **all other children** who may be **impacted** by changes in the family setting) and these must always be actively considered as part of decision making as a whole family approach.