PROTECTION CHILDCENTRED JUSTICE

Six Years, 32 Local Authorities and 10,000 Children

November 2025 marks a transformative moment for child protection in Scotland. All 32 local authorities have successfully adopted the Scottish Child Interview Model - a trauma-informed approach to joint investigative interviewing, that places children's needs and rights at the heart of the process.

More than 10,000 children who have experienced or witnessed significant harm, have had space and support to tell their stories in interviews which are specifically designed to let children safely share what they experienced and begin their recovery. Through more considered planning, improved interviewing techniques, we are capturing best evidence, while, more crucially, supporting children's emotional wellbeing. That is no small achievement.

Six years ago, when I stepped into the role of National Implementation Coordinator for this pioneering new model, a colleague asked, only half-jokingly, if I thought I'd taken on an impossible task. Their sympathetic smile invited me to agree that this was beyond my capabilities.

Throughout my 30-plus years in social work, I've sometimes been called 'too optimistic', 'idealistic', even 'naïve'. Many social workers will recognise these labels. Intentionally or otherwise, they are words that can undermine professional confidence and self-belief. More importantly, they reveal a misunderstanding of what drives us: a profound belief in the capacity for change.

From the earliest days of social work training, we learn that we are our best resource. We invest in ourselves because we are agents of change. In the social work task, we walk beside people who may need to borrow our strength for a while—and that's okay; it is always returned in a better condition.

My unwavering "no" to that question about impossibility was rooted in the nurturing I received as a child and reinforced by countless experiences of witnessing children and families face unimaginable adversity with courage, humility, and sometimes rage. Those moments taught me that change is possible—even in circumstances others might deem hopeless.

As my career evolved, I moved from working directly with families to supporting change within different kinds of systems.

When children need extra care and protection beyond their usual family and support networks, a wide range of professionals contribute to supporting them and keeping them safe. In Scotland, we've long embraced the mantra: *"It's Everyone's Job to Make Sure I'm Alright."* Effective protection only happens when we work together across agencies.

Even when it is 'almost impossible' to achieve, multiagency collaboration brings enormous benefits. It's not easy, but it's essential. Different professional cultures, competing priorities,

and organisational structures can create a swirling current that pulls us in conflicting directions. I've sometimes seen colleagues cling to professional differences like life rafts.

I've always found it easier to focus on what unites us: our shared hope for change, our commitment to making life better for children who have been hurt.

For me, real change—and real hope—doesn't come from bold rhetoric or grand visions. It emerges quietly, in the spaces between people, in the moments where trust begins to grow.

Six years on, I reflect on the difference this work has made. I never meet the children who take part in these interviews, but I see their feedback in drawings and cards. I hear interviewers speak with awe about what children have been able to share. I listen to social work and police managers who work tirelessly to ensure the right supports are in place.

All of this builds such vivid pictures for me that, in my imagination, I can almost see the scenario unfolding in front of me.

I see a child arriving at an interview suite clutching a teddy bear, or a notebook, or a mobile phone in their arms, while the invisible weight of what else they carry shows in the way they hold themselves.

I see them being met by a social worker and a police officer who have spent hours, or even days, planning for that child's arrival. One has deliberately worn a green scarf, because they know this child loves that colour and finds it calming. They welcome the child into a dry, warm space. The biscuits on offer are Jaffa Cakes, which just happen to be that child's favourite treat. It's a rainy Wednesday. A day of the week where the child has no after-school activities, no plans that need to be rearranged. This is a time and space agreed with and for them.

I see the beginning of a connection between the child and the interviewers, and I see this growing through careful - and caring - words and actions. It looks like a tiny flame that glows and becomes brighter.

I see the child start to tell their story to the interviewers. To share the hurt they have experienced, not knowing what reaction will come. For many children, the risk they take in sharing what has happened, is huge.

I see the initial account unfolding from the child – what we call 'free narrative' - and then I see the child pause, awaiting an unknown response from the social worker and police officer beside them, listening intently.

In that infinitesimal pause, I see the child's hopes and fears and worries and expectations spilling into the space between them and the interviewers. Time slows down. And then I see the interviewer lean in and say, "*Tell me more*..."

These three little words carry extraordinary power.

They don't just form the foundation of an open questioning strategy—essential in any forensic interview—they also send a profound message to the child: *we want to hear your story, in all its detail, and we are strong enough to hold the pain you've carried*. In that moment, the child learns that they are not alone, and that some of the weight they've borne can be shared.

To date, 10,000 children have heard these words. Within them, they've heard something even greater: that their voice matters, their story is valued, and there are adults who will fight fiercely for their right to safety and protection.

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