

AFA SCOTLAND RESPONSE TO THE NATIONAL CARE SERVICE CONSULTATION PROCESS



The Adoption and Fostering Alliance (AFA) Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Scottish Government's consultation in relation to the proposal of a National Care Service to include children and families social work and social care.

AFA Scotland is an independent, charitable organisation dedicated to improving outcomes for children in care by providing support to all those working in the field of adoption, fostering, kinship and the care of looked after children. Our response 'AFA Scotland' reflects the extensive knowledge and experience within the organisation, as well as the dialogue established with our membership through our national practitioner forums and consortia, including all 32 local authorities, voluntary adoption agencies, independent fostering providers, medical advisers, legal firms as well as independent members. We have also been informed by responses to a survey of our members.

Q23. Should the National Care Service include both adults and children's social work and social care services?

Yes No

AFA Scotland believes that this question is a significant one, with far-reaching consequences for individuals and families within Scotland who will be affected by changes to these services, and for the children's social work and social care workforce. We fully agree with the statement of the Chair of the Promise, Fiona Duncan, that ['before embarking on such a shift in how social care is provided in Scotland, we must completely understand what the impact will be on every child, adult, family and community'](#). The view of AFA Scotland is that greater detail and evidence needs to be provided on how the NCS will help to #KeepThePromise and whether this is the best means to do so. The proposal to include children's services within the NCS needs to be informed by evidence from evaluations of similar integration initiatives, not least the role of Integration Joint Boards. Discussion with our members indicates that for most professionals in this sector there has been insufficient time for them to be able to fully consider the implications of the NCS, and they have many questions which cannot be answered as they feel there is not enough detail within the proposal.

Making a success of such significant organisational change requires substantial 'buy in' from the children's social work and social care sector. The Promise has achieved such 'buy in' and provides incremental change plans as to how its recommendations will be implemented over the next decade. AFA Scotland fully supports the recommendations of the Promise and acknowledges the aspirations of the NCS to #KeepThePromise by keeping the child at the centre, including people with lived experience in strategic decision-making, supporting easier transitions, improving coordination of services for families in order to reduce complexity, and breaking down silo working. We also recognize the potential for an NCS to lead to more consistency in policy and practice across the country and therefore greater clarity for people as to their rights and what to expect from services. It also provides the potential for greater planning and coordination of services, including possibly enhanced ability to implement national strategies that cut across multiple government departments such as reducing child poverty.

Whether the NCS as currently proposed is the best means with which to achieve these aims is not clear from the level of detail that has so far been provided. The basis of the proposals for the NCS are from the recommendations of the Independent Review into Adult Social Care, but not the Independent Care Review into children's services. Experience to date of Integration Joint Boards has been that the size of adult health and social care has tended to marginalise the voices of social work, and children and families. There are significant differences between adults and children's social work and social care, with a case-management approach predominating within adult's social

work in contrast to the relationship-based approach aspired to within children's services. The mixed market of care within adult social care contrasts with the Promise's recommendation that the profit motive should be absent from the provision of services to vulnerable children and young people. Detailed consideration needs to be given as to how such tensions will be reconciled within the NCS.

The current timescale for implementing the NCS appears overly ambitious if sufficient consideration is to be given to developing the service through design by those with lived experience, and in participation with the children's social work and social care sector, rather than being a top-down change. The risk is that the voice of the child, and their carers, are lost within this change. AFA Scotland are therefore of the view that further detailed consultation needs to take place with the children's services sector and with children and families, and that sufficient time needs to be given to allow this to be thorough. There also needs to be an evidence framework to support the assertion that the NCS is the correct model to improve service delivery.

Q24. Do you think that locating children's social work and social care services within the National Care Service will reduce complexity for children and their families in accessing services?

• For children with disabilities

Yes No

AFA Scotland sees the potential of an NCS to reduce complexity for children with disabilities and their families through removing barriers to greater coordination between services and therefore the provision of more holistic support, more comprehensive pathways to support, and better transition planning into adulthood. There may be scope for better information sharing through shared records so that children and families do not repeatedly have to tell their stories and provide the same information. This however would need to satisfy the requirements of the general data protection regulations so that it respects the rights of children and families.

• For transitions to adulthood

Yes No

Similarly to the last question, AFA Scotland sees the potential of an NCS to reduce complexity for children with disabilities and their families to provide more seamless transitions for children who at the moment too often face a significant reduction in support, as well as wholesale change in their professional team, when they reach legal adulthood. Welcome initiatives such as continuing care are inconsistently interpreted and implemented across the country and an NCS may provide for fairer application of such policies and reduce the 'postcode lottery'.

• For children with family members needing support

Yes No

Following in the same vein as the last two responses, AFA Scotland sees the potential of an NCS to reduce complexity for children whose family members need support through removing barriers to greater coordination between services and therefore the provision of more holistic support. There is potential for greater preventative support to children and their families if social workers are enabled to work more closely with children and families, and the services supporting them when needs arise, rather than waiting until unmet needs reach a threshold or develop into a crisis. This would represent a move to a needs-led and preventative, rather than resource-led, care system.

AFA Scotland notes however that it is so far unclear from the level of detail provided as to how working practices between professionals would change from being within the NCS. GIRFEC working practices have been legislated for and are well-established in most local authorities. Therefore, to promote greater inter-professional working requires a plan for the further embedding of GIRFEC principles within organisational culture, as well as professionals within the NCS and other services providing support to children and their families being provided with the capacity and resources to work more closely together. Nor does the proposal make clear whether the NCS would reduce the number of professionals required to be involved with a child and their family at any given time. The

NCS would not reduce the complexity for children and families associated with the separate child protection, Children's Hearings, and court systems without further legislation relating to these areas. A more preventative system would though be expected to reduce the level of intervention required into children and families' lives over time and in keeping with the Promise.

Whilst AFA Scotland agrees with the taking of a 'whole family approach' and keeping children within their families, there will always be children who need to be cared for away from their families and there will always be a need for permanence away from home in the form of fostering, kinship, and adoption. The NCS consultation has not explicitly considered this aspect of children's services and information is required in order to inform consideration of how these services will be affected.

Q25. Do you think that locating children's social work services within the National Care Service will improve alignment with community child health services including primary care, and paediatric health services?

Yes No

AFA Scotland believes that the NCS has the potential to improve alignment between children's social work services and community child health services but that there is so far a lack of detail about how this would be achieved. There is some very good alignment and working together between children's services, primary care and paediatric health services across the country, but our members identify that levels differ between Health and Social Care Partnership areas, and it is important that this forms the evidence base for any proposals within the NCS.

Q26. Do you think there are any risks in including children's services in the National Care Service?

Yes No

AFA Scotland believes that the timescales for consultation and implementation of the NCS do not provide enough time for full consideration within the children's services sector of the proposals and engagement with children and families in developing the NCS. There is a risk that the resulting organisational change becomes 'top-down' and runs contrary to the Promise. It needs to be clear, based upon detailed consideration and evidence, as to how the NCS will support the implementation of the Promise, rather than risking funnelling energy and resources away from the Promise and towards creation of the NCS.

A consistent theme from feedback from AFA Scotland's membership has been that there has been a lack of time for them to fully consider the implications of children's services becoming part of the NCS. The last eighteen months has been very challenging for the sector in responding and adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as working towards changes coming forward from the Promise and the new legislation on brothers and sisters and the Children's Hearing system. This has left many feeling that there is a lack of capacity to also look at significant organisational change in the form of the NCS.

As noted within our answer to Q23, the experience of health and social care integration from the perspective of adult's social work has been that the voice of social work has become marginalised within the IJBs, and therefore a risk that the social work profession and identity becomes subsumed within the wider concept of social care. Within an NCS, there would be the further risk that due to their respective sizes, the role of children's social work and social care becomes marginalised in comparison to the much larger adult's social work and social care sector. Social work is a skilled profession requiring distinct qualifications, training, and values. Social work with children and families encompasses a range of specialisms reflective of the complexity of children and families' lives. Greater detail and consideration need to be given as to how such services would be managed, structured and regulated within the NCS without losing or diluting the essential contribution of children and families social work.

Whilst the NCS may lead to greater standardisation of policy and practice across the country, there is a risk with centralised decision-making that geographically distant and/or smaller regions feel marginalised and flexibility in delivering local solutions to meet local needs is lost, stifling creativity.

Children's social work and social care across the country work closely with colleagues in education, early learning and childcare in particular, as well as Housing and third sector providers. There is a risk that moving social work and social care out of local authorities may create barriers to maintaining and enhancing these local relationships and partnerships, possibly then creating further complexity and bureaucracy for children and their families, as well as practitioners. Legislation to establish the NCS also needs to avoid adding complexity and bureaucracy, given the plethora of legislation affecting the children's social work and social care sectors over the past twenty years.

Q54. What benefits do you think there would be in establishing a National Social Work Agency? (Tick all that apply)

- Raising the status of social work
- Improving training and continuous professional development
- Supporting workforce planning
- Other – please explain

AFA Scotland hopes that benefits that may be available through a NSW are clearer career pathways for social workers, more variety and higher quality CPD opportunities, and support to undertake practitioner research. Amongst the barriers to practitioners undertaking CPD and research are their heavy caseloads, emotionally demanding work, and lack of resources to support training and research. These would need to be addressed to realise the potential of a NSW.

A National Social Work Agency (NSWA) has the potential to standardise pay, terms and conditions for the children's social work and social care sectors which has the benefit of providing greater fairness and transparency for workers and allow for larger-scale collective bargaining. This does not come without also creating risks. Our members have identified that the cost of living varies across the country, and higher salary and better terms and conditions can be used by employers to compensate for variation in cost of living, attract workers into areas with labour shortfalls, and reward long service. A national mechanism would need to resolve these tensions and could lead to the maintenance of variation in pay, terms and conditions. It is therefore questionable whether this system would be favourable to the present one.

The central planning and coordination of social work practice learning placements nationally has the potential to reduce bureaucracy and inefficiency within this process and align it to national workforce planning. It needs however to ensure that valuable local connections and partnerships are not undermined.

Q55. Do you think there would be any risks in establishing a National Social Work Agency?

There is the risk in establishing a NSW that duplication is created with the work of the Scottish Social Services Council, the Care Inspectorate, and the Scottish Association of Social Workers. Consideration needs to be given to respective responsibilities of these organisations and relationships within the social work sector. This includes relationships with other training providers including universities, colleges, and the third sector.

Q56. Do you think a National Social Work Agency should be part of the National Care Service?

- Yes
- No

AFA Scotland considers that there are benefits and risks to the NSW being part of the NCS. Benefits include the potential for greater alignment between the needs of the NCS and the possible functions of the NSW such as training and workforce planning. The risk of this would be that the NSW becomes subservient to the needs of the NCS. Benefits of it being independent from, but having close working arrangements with, the NCS are that the NSW would be able to serve as a critical friend to the NCS.

Social work education has a long critical tradition which would risk being eroded through a loss of independence within either pre-qualifying or post-qualifying training. The social work profession is concerned with social justice, with a role not solely to be an arm of the state but to work within 'the social', that is the area between the state and its citizens. This is an important safeguard against

the social work profession merely serving the interests of the state rather than those of its citizens, with the risk that this results in over-intrusion into private and family life.

Q57. Which of the following do you think that a National Social Work Agency should have a role in leading on? (Tick all that apply)

- Social work education, including practice learning**
- National framework for learning and professional development, including advanced practice**
- Setting a national approach to terms and conditions, including pay**
- Workforce planning**
- Social work improvement**
- A centre of excellence for applied research for social work**
- Other – please explain**

AFA Scotland believes that a centre of excellence for applied research for social work could assist in developing research and practice in Scotland, and closer ties between the two. Whether the other areas should be part of the NSW Agency requires further consideration and discussion with the SSSC, Care Inspectorate, and the higher education sector.