

Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. It is my absolute pleasure to be here today. As many of you will know, I spent a significant large part of my career working in the field of homelessness so to be addressing a Shelter conference is a really great pleasure for me – a great honour to be combining my current role as Scotland’s Commissioner for Children and Young People with a area of work about which I feel passionately. So, today I will:

Give you some idea about how I see my role as Commissioner and how it relates to today’s event

Focus on the central issue of listening to the voices, experiences and views of children and young people

And finally, make some suggestions for the way forward in terms of responding to some of those messages that come from children and young people.

My role

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Act (Scotland) 2003 defines my role which actually has more duties than powers. I will go about fulfilling my duties through 3 Strategic Aims:

Strategic Aim 1

Increase awareness and understanding of the UNCRC – the UK is a signatory to this international convention and commits us to a minimum standards in terms of how we treat our children. However, it is not well known and far less understood. So, one of my aims is to popularise the UNCRC. As far as today's topic is concerned, there are many articles of relevance in the UNCRC such as: a child's right to survival and development; a child's right to a family life; a child's right to good health; a child's right to education. All of these are violated to some extent when a children in families experience homelessness.

Strategic Aim 2

Promote and safeguard children's rights. Sign up to the UNCRC requires states to be subject to monitoring through the UN Monitoring Committee that publish periodic reports – the last of these was in 2008 and it highlights where we need to do better in terms of the fulfilment of children's rights in the UK, including Scotland. Suffice to say, there are numerous areas where we can and should do better. I intend to approach this aim through the prism of vulnerable groups of children and given the list of violations of rights I mentioned earlier, it is easy to see that homeless families are an area where we should be doing better.

Strategic Aim 3

Increase participation and engagement of children and young people. I see this as a top priority and one in which I have a specific responsibility to take a lead role – to be a role model in Scotland because it is central to the betterment of the lives of children and young people in Scotland. I will come back to this, but before I do, I want to mention two overarching issues which will ribbon their way through my work –

themes which will regularly surface because of the overarching importance to the lives of children and young people in Scotland.

Overarching Issues

Child Poverty – for me, child poverty is the most corrosive structural influence on life chances, the outcomes for children and young people in Scotland. If this is not tackled, then everything I have mentioned – will do little to stem the flow of uneven outcomes for children and young people across the country. I know that Douglas is saying more on this later, so no need for me to labour the point other than to emphasise its importance.

Early Years Framework – for me, this is the most important policy initiative of Scottish Government that can genuinely provide a platform for generational change in the rearing and nurturing of our children and young people. I will do everything I can to influence the implementation of the transformation of our approach to the early rearing of our children. And the reason for this is that we now know it is

laying the foundation for their future resilience – their ability to cope with the stresses and strains of life – I heard someone describe it as their vaccine for life’s challenges and I wish I had said it as I think this is a very strong metaphor.

Listening to children and young people

Back to the UNCRC and the centrality of Article 12 – the right for a child to have a view, the right for that view to be expressed, and the right for due weight to be given to that view in accordance with their age and maturity.

One of the ways that I am satisfying this right is to initiate a nation-wide conversation with children and young people. The intention is to engage with thousands and thousands of children and young people across Scotland. I am in the process of promoting this through a series of receptions across the country engaging with teachers, youth workers, health workers, social workers – anyone who is working directly with children and young people. This will offer a diverse range of

opportunities to engage with children and young people – seeking their views on what matters to them and should be improved, their views on what things are going well in their lives and offering the opportunity to party - to celebrate the 21st anniversary of the UNCRC. I am calling it a Right Blether, leading to a vote in November this year. At the risk of a plug, please see me after if you are interested in participating – and I offer that invitation to Shelter and all attending the conference today.

I get to speak to a lot of children and young people in my role as Commissioner for Children and Young People. I visit schools and youth clubs – just now promoting involvement in A Right Blether. One of the things that I do is to gift them an imaginary magic wand. I ask them to take the wand, shut their eyes and think of what they would do with the wand to make the lives of children and young people better – what would they do to improve any aspect of their lives. I get some brilliant responses, and also some themes emerge from what the children say. For instance, child poverty often comes up – sometimes in that phrase, other times expressed through a wish that children had enough food, or

clothing. And one of the themes is homelessness – it is one of the strongest and most persistent themes – to prevent children experiencing homelessness – that comes from the desires and wishes on what children would do with the wand. So, I have no doubt about the importance to children of a stable family life in good housing.

I had the great pleasure of being present at the launch of the Shelter DVD, What is a Home? – made by children who have experienced homelessness. I know that you are going to see this later today, so I will not give the game away on any of the content. What I do want to share with you are my thoughts on the value of the views of children and young people, the need to be prepared to listen and the very long way we have to go before we can be confident that this is a routine part of our everyday engagement with them.

Shelter understands this. Shelter has previously sought, recorded and published the views of children and young people who experience homelessness – for example, in 2009 it publish ‘Acting in the Best

Interests of Homeless Children. And forgive me if this seems cheeky, but I am going to quote some of this back to you. Here are some of what children said:

Firstly, some of the negative things they have experienced:

“There is nothing I like about where I live.....I have no friends at school and I miss my friends.”

“There is nothing I like about where I live.....I share the flat with my brother, and my mother and her boyfriend have to sleep in the living room.” (9 year old)

“I dislike that since I was born I have moved 8 times” (12 year old)

One of the other children said they would cry if they had to move again.

The thing that strikes me is the ordinariness of what the children are saying. Please make sure we have friends a social group that we are part of – we all know how isolating and difficult it is when we do not have friends. Please make sure I have enough space to live, a space I can call my own – we all know the impact of overcrowding has on family life and well being. And finally, please make sure I do not have to face too many moves in my short life because it causes me stress and harms my development – and we know that being on the move is one of the high stress factors in all of our lives.

And just to illustrate how ordinary are the hopes and desires of our children, here is what one of them said about a place where they like to be:

“I like that a park and a community centre is near us, our backs (gardens) are good and large, and that a Brownie club is near us.”

Child Protection

However, this isn't just about ordinary desires satisfying the needs of children. This isn't just about heeding the messages from research in terms of promoting resilience in our children and avoiding risk factors.

In some instances we are talking about children's lives. And the reason I say that is because what we know from the research that one of the risk factors for children who have died at the hands of their carers is the frequency with which the family moved house or changed accommodation. So, in amongst the figures for family homelessness there is a small number of children who are living in potentially dangerous circumstances – of which the frequent moves is just one factor. Yet, it is a factor, an indicator that can provide a powerful in on a vulnerable child. So, for me - working with children in homeless families is more than trying to ameliorate the difficult circumstances and negative impact on the child – working to prevent family homelessness is more than good practice towards the better rearing of our children. For me working to prevent family homelessness and supporting children where it occurs is part of our child protection response, because in this

population of children are some – a very few - who are in very severe risk – sadly, experience tells us this is the case.

Future service provision

And it is on this note that I want to make my final comments. It is related to the vulnerability of family support services for children and young people who are homeless. It is to emphasise that these services are not an add-on to homeless services – neither are they an add-on to child protection services. In my view they are vital services satisfying a crucial role in promoting the well being of vulnerable children – in some instances our most vulnerable children - who have a right to expect better – who we can identify to be in deficit of many of the articles of the UNCRC.

We have a responsibility to listen to them, but we also have a responsibility to act to ensure they enjoy the same rights and protections as all other children.