

Secure Care National Project: 2015 to 2018

Background

In 2015, the Scottish Government funded a fixed term Secure Care National Advisor role at CYCJ to undertake an independent, strategic and practice focused review of secure care in Scotland. This work was known as the Secure Care National Project. There were several key drivers behind this.

First, the Scottish Government recognised there was a need to revisit the purpose, function, impact and experience of secure care in the context of the Getting it Right for Every Child strategic framework (GIRFEC) and the many developments in law, policy and practice since the previous review of secure care, the Securing Our Future Initiative (known as SOFI), which reported in 2009.

Second, whilst overall there has been a continuing (and at points steep) downward trend in the use of secure care by the CHS, local authorities and the Courts in Scotland since 2011, there have been some spikes within this. As four of the five centres are run by independent charitable organisations, whilst it is positive if vulnerable young people where there are concerns about significant harm to themselves or others are being kept safe without being detained in care, the unpredictability and volatility in use means considerable financial uncertainty, and raises questions about both expectations and sustainability and when, if, and for whom secure care is necessary.

There was growing recognition that for all these reasons, strategic analysis was required to provide direction and inform the planning and commissioning processes for the future.

The work of the Secure Care National Project

The Scottish Government asked the project to work with sector leads and other partners to:

- ensure the effective delivery of service to children in secure care
- review current trends, achievements and risks
- make recommendations to partners about future configuration of the secure estate

The project began with a year-long stakeholder engagement programme, hearing from 60 people with secure care experience, more than 200 practitioners and managers across Scotland's five secure care centres, and engaging with numerous stakeholders and partners to explore experiences, views and perceptions of secure care.

A national multi-agency gathering of stakeholders took place in December 2015. Following this, a [briefing paper](#) was shared with 100 sector leads, to inform their discussions at a national event in April 2016 to reflect on the emerging findings and discuss next steps.

A research project was also initiated to study routes into secure care and responses to young people whose behaviours present a high risk of harm. This aimed to examine both the themes and issues highlighted by the Secure Care National Project work during its first year, and those raised in a previous 2015 CYCJ report, [Secure Care in Scotland: A Scoping Study](#).

In June 2017, CYCJ published the report from this new study, setting out findings and recommendations from in-depth qualitative research exploring the role of [Chief Social Work Officers and secure care in Scotland](#).

Key messages and recommendations arising from the Secure Care National Project overall were published by CYCJ in the report [Secure Care in Scotland: Looking Ahead](#) in November 2016.

Findings

The findings summarised in [Secure Care in Scotland: Looking Ahead](#) were wide ranging but it is important to acknowledge the many positive developments and achievements in the secure care sector in Scotland, which are well documented through inspection reports, external evaluations and awards achieved. The project found that practitioners and managers across the sector and those involved in decision making, placing and looking after young people in and on the edges of secure care were overwhelmingly caring, compassionate, skilled and dedicated. Professionals seemed to be trying their best to meet the really complex and diverse needs of very troubled and vulnerable young people.

However, it is a complex and difficult picture. The reflections on life in care shared by young people were moving, sometimes dismaying, and sometimes uplifting. They shared powerful accounts of the impact of secure care. Some said being secured had saved their life, and/or had changed their life and their hopes for the future, for the better. Others had difficult experiences of secure care, and the care system more widely, particularly in relation to how well they felt they were listened to, heard or understood (or not) within day to day and agency decision making processes such as reviews and children's hearings. Many struggled coping with living in a restricted environment, for example not being allowed to wear certain types of clothing or jewellery in case they hurt themselves or someone else. There were striking echoes in their accounts with the testimony of previous generations of young people in secure care.

The key professional decision makers like Chief Social Work Officers had differing views about both the purpose and quality of secure care in Scotland. This lack of cohesion seemed to be exacerbated by: the absence of a national strategic and standards framework, i.e. there is no stated set of values, principles, or underpinning care and treatment model which applies across what is described as the secure care 'sector'; and the view of secure care as 'other' and being 'outside' of and separate from the wider care system.

The focus of the previous national review, SOFI, and of the subsequent and current policy and guidance, is on preventative interventions, ensuring young people are diverted from secure care and on further reducing the use of secure care. The project concluded that more attention should be paid to the impact and experience of secure care itself, and especially how young people are supported by their local authorities before and during the admission and placement, and after secure care.

Of the hundreds of people who we spoke with, only a handful stated categorically that secure care was unnecessary, but there is a lack of shared understanding between and across agencies, as to when secure care is appropriate and no collective vision of the future place, purpose and function of secure care.

The vast majority of young people in secure care are there for their own protection rather than as a result of offences they have committed. And for those who are there on sentence or remand, there is a growing body of evidence which shows that young people who offend are almost always young people who have experienced multiple difficulties, hurt, neglect, trauma, bereavement and abuse.

The available information about young people coming into secure care tells us that most have significant mental and emotional health needs as a consequence of their family and care histories. Time and time again, professionals have raised concerns about gaps in community services across health and social care, which could meet their needs.

There were a number of young people who still equated secure care and custody with a Young Offenders' Institution (YOI), with some describing having to "do your time" in secure care. The current governance

arrangements mean that the Scottish Government Youth Justice team oversees secure care, and this further indicates that secure care (and therefore perhaps young people who are in and on the edges of secure care) is still considered through a youth justice lens; whereas at any one time there are up to ten times the number of 16 to 18 year olds in a YOI setting on sentence or remand than there are in secure care.

The project concluded that there is a strong need for a Scotland-wide consistently nurturing, holistic response to young people where there are very high risks of significant harm, which recognises the impact of difficult childhood experiences and trauma on young people.

Recommendations

A core recommendation was the establishment of a national Strategic Board to provide leadership and direction, giving a voice to care experienced young people and involving them in driving a long term programme of transformation for secure care and approaches to young people in and on the edges of secure care in Scotland. The Scottish Government accepted this recommendation and in its work plan committed to:

“establish a Strategic Board to link secure care provision to our Getting it Right For Looked After Children (GIRFEC) Strategy and the overall GIRFEC approach”

[A Plan for Scotland: The Government’s Programme for Scotland 2016-17](#)

In [Secure Care in Scotland: Looking Ahead](#), the Strategic Board was envisaged as leading and co-ordinating the work required to develop and action the key findings and recommendations arising from the Secure Care National Project, specifically:

- a national strategy and standards framework for secure care;
- further exploration of the interface between secure care, the CHS and adult justice system and the use of secure care and imprisonment when young people are sentenced or remanded;
- a strategic partnership approach to engage all responsible corporate parents in the review of commissioning and resourcing arrangements for secure care (commissioning arm);
- The Scottish Government has funded an extension to the project, with the focus being on supporting the establishment and functioning of the board to take things forward.