



HIGHLAND
THIRD
SECTOR
INTERFACE

Highland Third Sector Children and Young People's Service Provision Report

January 2023



Context and Background

In response to the pending update to the Community Planning Partnership's (CPP) Integrated Children's Services Board (ICSB) strategic planning and needs analysis, Highland Third Sector Interface (HTSI) engaged a range of service providers across the children and young people service provision within Highland's Third Sector.

The report has been circulated firstly to participants and thereafter to HTSI membership for comment.

The report will be used to better understand the current landscape of service provision for children, young people and their families and specifically to consider their needs and how they are currently being met. This evidence will be fed into the ICSB's 2021-2024 Plan update and the Board's strategic needs analysis. This report is complemented by a mapping workshop hosted by HTSI in February 2023 to identify Third Sector services provided to children and young people in Highland.

A better understanding of the current landscape has been identified as a key strategic need, both in determining areas of unmet need but more broadly in how resources and additional funding can be best used to meet current and emerging needs. This not only better informs the ICSB's plan update, but also educates HTSI and the Third Sector of where gaps, potential collaborations, or duplications exist; allowing for the sector to improve their response to needs and better support children, young people, and their families.

The three groups focused around four questions:

1. What needs are we seeing in Highland?
2. Of the services out there, what is working well?
3. Of the services provided, what is not working? What could be done to improve them?
4. What needs are not being met?

The approach was taken due to the tight deadline for the ICSB's plan update. This report is not intended to cover every experience across the whole sector, but to capture the discussions and themes to develop a deeper understanding of what service providers are seeing and experiencing in practice at the current moment, the impact of the pandemic, and the cost-of-living crisis.

The groups were facilitated on Microsoft Teams and included between five and eight participants. Participants included representation from across different geographies, organisational focus and size.

Below are listed some of the key messages that arose during the conversations:

- **Increased pressure on families**, resulting from financial pressures due to job losses, employment worries, cost-of-living crisis, deepening poverty social circumstances, and the stigma attached.
- **Parent/carer needs are not being met** in regard to isolation, peer support, lack of confidence, coping with challenging behaviour, and feelings of inadequacy. These appear to have worsened during and following the pandemic.
- There is an **increase in demand for childcare**, with less funding available or staffing to support this. Although flexible working and more remote employment is available post-pandemic, flexible childcare services that meet families' needs are still not being realised.
- Other aspects of **diminished support since the pandemic** include: the social care package of support, respite, and being linked into social work.
- **Increasing expectation/reliance from the public sector on the Third Sector** to support children and their families with no additional resourcing.

“If someone asks for help, the help should be there”

- **Alcohol and drug misuse continues to be an issue**, with drug use now being seen in groups that it previously wasn't seen in.
- **There are families that are currently seeking support that have never sought it before.** They are unfamiliar with the processes, where to go for help, and how to access the help they need when they need it.
- **Higher levels of intervention at crisis points are happening.**
- **There are less places and safe spaces to gather** for young people and families, and the venues that are available have increased their fees, which is inhibiting the ability of groups to become established or to continue.

“The vast majority of parents we are working with are lone parents”

- **Unreliable public transport came up repeatedly** across multiple discussion areas. Accessing services, the ability to reduce isolation, supporting life transitions (especially for those transitioning into adulthood, and into employment) and generally how this all contributed to an increase of mental health issues.
- We are seeing **growing and ongoing financial hardship in Highland.** Children arriving to school without breakfast and with torn uniforms.
- Not recognising that **lockdown was beneficial for certain children and young people.** For some of those students who thrived during lockdown they have not returned to school. Particularly those with additional support needs. There needs to be different options available for this group that better meets their needs.
- There is an **increased need for young people to seek support outwith their families.** There has been a breakdown in the non-family support networks in communities

due to the pandemic and services not re-opening, this has limited the ability of young people to know where and how to seek support outside of their family.

- **Increase in communities experiencing traumatic events** locally, highlighting a greater need for meaningful trauma support at the community level.
- **CAMHS referral wait times** – due to the long waiting times for assessment there is a need for support and information for those on the waiting list. One idea discussed was an information pack for parents/carers with information and where to access resources and support so they can be proactive during their waiting time.
- Seeing an increase in parents seeking services to support their children, which is different than children needing direct support.
- It is recognised that families and young people are accessing support differently than prior to the pandemic. There is a drop in people physically going out to seek support, therefore more **services need to meet people where they are** – bring the service to them.
- There seems to be a lot of anecdotal evidence that parents that spend more time online feel greater pressure to present themselves publicly as unflawed, which feeds into public anxiety and increases their lack of confidence.
- **'Parent blaming' or 'mum shaming' is not only found in online spaces, but within Children's Plans as well** and exacerbates the feelings of isolation and increases parent's lack of confidence.
- **There is a lack of value placed on the needs of younger children post-pandemic.** Not recognising that this generation has different needs than previous. There is seemingly an inability to adapt services to meet these different needs, which is having a negative effect on this generation of children. For younger children – the right to play and recognising there may be developmental delays in this generation is important when adapting services to meet these new demands.

“In Highland we have a really high proportion of female offenders compared to other local authorities, an outcome [of] that is that children and young people ... tend to end up in care more often.”

- **The dearth of joined up timely support** has been highlighted as an ongoing issue. In particular, antenatal and new parent support – they are directed to a pregnancy app, which isn't going to be sufficient for meeting all needs.
- **Decrease in mental wellbeing among young carers** linked directly to caring roles and limited support within schools for those who are young carers.
- There is an over-reliance on accessing children and young people through the education system, but at the same time, there is also **not enough service providers linked into schools.**
- The **participation in decision-making can feel like a tick-box exercise** for young people, and it has been recognised that the same groups are repeatedly solicited. Participation requests need to be genuine and result in actions and there should be a wider demographic solicited to capture the variety of needs within the population of children and young people in Highland.

- Huge need for more consideration of **how we ensure participation and voice of children and young people with different additional support needs and disabilities in decision-making.**
- There is **not enough capacity in bereavement services for children in Highland.** Not addressing this type of trauma at a young age has huge knock-on negative effects in adulthood.

"Unresolved grief [from childhood] is a massive contributing factor for individuals who end up in justice systems"

Mental Health

Isolation

It is recognised that there is an increase in mental health issues amongst children, young people and their parent/carers in Highland. The increase in isolation and less peer interaction were seen as contributing factors. These have been seen to lead to anxiety among school-aged children and loss of confidence in parents and carers.

Isolation for children, due to long periods of staying at home, and their reliance on their parent/carers to facilitate peer interaction (compounded by parent/carers diminished interaction with other families), has seen an increase in anxiety in social settings, lower social skills, increase in mental health issues, and less social resilience. It was also recognised that isolation among young people has been a result of not only the pandemic, but the additional challenges around fewer safe places to congregate and the lack of reliable public transport in Highland.

Isolation for young carers is also seen as a contributing factor for the rise in mental health issues amongst this group. Diminished support services, lack of reliable public transport, increased mental health issues for those they are caring for, and increased financial pressures were seen as contributing factors.

Parents/Carers

The focus groups all discussed the challenges that parents/carers (and especially newer and lone parents) are having due to isolation. The lack of confidence was highlighted as the major factor for newer parents/carers. At a time when peer interaction is crucial in building confidence many baby and toddler groups that were closed due to the pandemic have not restarted. Some of the reasons for this has been cited that venues and spaces that were previously used have not reopened with others being unaffordable. Additionally, other reasons for the discontinuation of these groups are that they are passed on from parent to parent, with the pandemic breaking that chain and with no outside support or encouragement, these groups are not reopening.

Parents seem to be lacking the confidence to support their child's development and

behaviour, especially when that behaviour can be seen as 'challenging' culturally, which has been proven to ease with peer interaction between families. The capacity for parents to support children with appropriate coping mechanisms has also seemed to have diminished with this group as well, where isolation is playing a role, but also not having the same relationships with caregivers or teachers that parents had pre-pandemic. The lowering of capacity and understanding of how to deal with 'challenging' behaviour has resulted in an increase in anxiety of families spending time in public, instead choosing to cope with this behaviour at home, thus compounding anxiety and isolation and the inability to develop coping strategies. It was also discussed that people in general seem to be out of the habit of going out and seeking social situations. This seems to be mostly a result of habits formed during the pandemic, but some of it is attributed to financial pressures that families are currently experiencing due to the cost-of-living crisis as well as the aforementioned anxiety around the inability to publicly cope with their children's behaviours. This lack of confidence in parenting is also lowering parents' capacity for coping day-to-day and their resilience. Not knowing what is okay behaviour for their child and what is not (and relying on social media to dictate this, which will be discussed later in the report) has resulted in parents feeling like they are flailing. Many parents that Third Sector organisations are working with are lone parents, which brings an additional level of challenges.

Parent blaming was discussed as an issue that has fed into the lack of confidence amongst parent/carers. This is seen in social media, but also by service workers that parents and carers access when support is needed. Parents have expressed fear of being blamed for their child's behaviour, and in some instances afraid they will lose their child if they attempt to seek support. Language and tone, particularly in child's plans was highlighted as a major barrier to supporting families with positive outcomes. Words such as your child is a 'bad kid' and other inappropriate language and tone have been used in a child's plan which goes against the purpose of having a plan.

Crisis and early intervention

Parents/carers, for the most part, are seeking help from an early stage for their child or young person's mental health. Unfortunately, for the early support services that exist, they are overwhelmed, so many needs are unmet until crisis occurs. Emergency response services have been lauded as working well in Highland, but it has been

recognised They are overburdened by having to respond to mental health crisis. If there were support services for mental

“Where is the active response? Where is intervention for those who aren't actively seeking services?”

health needs before they reached crisis, there would be less crises. Additionally, allowing mental health issues to reach a crisis point increases the challenge of an individual in overcoming their issue than if addressed earlier on.

Transitions

There is a recognition of challenges arising for children and young people and their families that missed out on transition support due to the pandemic. This is every transition – into nursery, from nursery to primary school, from primary school to secondary school, from secondary school onwards to further education or employment, and for care leavers. For early years it is the lack of recognition of the importance of play-based learning; not taking a more slow-paced approach in the early year transitions is failing to recognise development differences from either less involvement in formal care settings such as nurseries, or not needing coping mechanisms addressed for socialisation for some of these children. Many younger children are not in the same place as those who were that age prior to the pandemic. Some children are just not ready to sit at a desk and hold a pencil, but then are seen as 'naughty' or problematic if they aren't conforming to traditional expectations of where they should be developmentally and socially.

For some children with additional support needs, staying at home, instead of having to attend school was a really positive experience for them, transition support for this group to return to school is absent, and some have not returned to education.

We are seeing for children and young people who missed transition support between primary and secondary and secondary onwards struggling more and engaging less and not attending available activities. The impact from the lack of support for these transitions has been delayed in some instances, so are only now showing up, or are yet to come to the surface. Additionally, it was highlighted that for many public sector transition activities that there is a financial ask attached with no support provided to families who cannot afford it, which is raising barriers for those with less means to participate.

Social media

Many of the issues highlighted in this report social media interaction is a factor. It is unclear how big a role it is playing in many instances. Some positive (staying connected, accessing resources and services), but more often than not, negative. Use

Whilst it is recognised that this generation of young people have a greater understanding of mental health than any generation previously, there are still huge stigmas attached to mental health challenges, which in turn still makes it difficult for them (and their families) to speak up or reach out when they need help or support. Additionally, not knowing where to go or how to access services can be a factor as well. Due to these challenges, some issues are not being addressed until they reach a crisis point. This has led to front line workers being the first point of entry for families within support services. This has put pressure on emergency services when staffing and funding has come under pressure as well.

was seen as exacerbating or amplifying issues and challenges for children, young people, and their families.

How we treat each other in online spaces in contrast to how we would treat each other

face-to-face has the dominant negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. Cyber bullying amongst young people to parent shaming/blaming for parent/carers, is, as we know, a deathly issue. On the other end of the spectrum, how people portray themselves online to how others inevitably compare themselves also has a negative impact. For the younger children, the impact for them comes through the negative impact it has on their parent/carer. For young people who are just wading into that world on their own, understanding how to engage with it and how not to engage when emotional maturity hasn't been gained is hugely challenging for them. For older young people it can be a fraught place – for some that is where they can find help and support (support and services for young people are increasingly being provided by apps and virtual spaces), but it is more often a space that decreases mental wellbeing.

Additional Support Needs

The need for more services for children and young people with additional support needs (ASN) was highlighted across all the focus groups only second to mental health. The Highland Council Area marks 40% of children and young people in school that have additional support needs, and this is rising. This is higher than other places in Scotland. Budgets have been getting cut, thus putting pressure on others that interact with these children. There is an over-reliance on (untrained) educators, schools and communities to fill these growing support gaps. Specific needs that are not being met include: Neuro development Assessment service (NDAS) waiting list times (with no provision in the interim), understanding how to support children with ASN without needing a diagnosis (such as lowering noise in the classroom, etc.), understanding that teachers don't have the capacity or knowledge to cope with the rising number of students with ASN in their classrooms, teachers classifying students as neuro-divergent when they are not, helping children self-regulate, anxiety (for reasons mentioned previously) is an increasing problem that exacerbates any challenges that a child is having, insufficient funding, training for those that interact with child's plans, and specifically ensuring that those who have a diagnosis of dyslexia are being supported as they transition into secondary school.

The identified list of needs not currently being met, or being insufficiently met is long, but there are some low-lying, low-cost pieces that could be addressed. The biggest hurdle seems to be the wait list times for diagnosis holding up all other processes including other services outwith education that they can't access due to diagnosis being a requirement.

Infrastructure

Transport

The lack of reliable public transport came up again and again. It fed into issues around mental health, accessing (or the inability to) services, and as a key factor in transitioning. Giving children free bus transport has been a great benefit, but

unfortunately in Highland attempting to travel locally using public transport has significant barriers, at times it is actually not possible to complete a journey using public transport within a reasonable time frame or on the same day. Older young people who have started further education have dropped out due to the lack of reasonable transport from where they live rurally. Unless reliability and usability are addressed, the barriers created by public transport issues in Highland will continue to stymie any steps made to address the other issues raised in this report (from lowering isolation to young carers accessing sexual health services). You could have world-class services, but if those who need them most are unable to get to them, they are worthless.

Accessing Information and Support

There is an awareness that many families and young people are seeking information and support that have never sought it before. This is not just for mental health services, but financial as well. The support structures that are in place are not necessarily adapted to support these individuals. Some of that is due to many of these services being inaccessible without a referral, and some due to this group being entirely unfamiliar with knowing how and where to access support and information. Where a person enters this complex system of statutory and Third Sector support is not currently captured, but anecdotally we see a myriad of ways. For those who have the capacity to actively seek support, the effectiveness of their search often times relies on the ability of their first port-of-call to signpost them to the right service. It was discussed that although there is some great work and collaboration out there across many public and Third Sector groups, there is a breakdown in relationships. This was attributed to ongoing issues around siloed work, but also the turnover of staff during a time of remote working has created a degradation in relationships that will take time to build back up. This is having a negative impact on individual's ability to know what services are out there, enabling effective signposting. Additionally, information for those who aren't working for a support service but are interacting with those who may need support (e.g., teachers) don't have the information they need to signpost. The inability for individuals to find the support or information they need and groups to effectively signpost also stems from the lack of easily accessible information on where and how to access this. If you are tech-savvy you may have a slight edge, but even then, understanding what service you need and then how to access that service is still incredibly challenging. There is currently no way to search by service in Highland. It is also recognised that there needs to be a reduction in the strictness of criteria for those who can receive support. The current referral process seems to be creating a fractured hurdle process where service providers are seen more as gatekeepers, not enablers.

What is working for the Third Sector?

Looking at some of the positive aspects of work in the Third sector, it was recognised that in Highland we really try not to duplicate the work of other organisations and try to add value where we can. Due to our strong networks, we have a respect for each other,

“Our knowledge of each other is a huge asset to us working together”

recognising and using our specialisms and strengths. This helps us make

the most of the resources we have (financial and people). We are passionate about our work, care about our local communities - our motivations are helping individuals and communities reach their best outcomes. Due to the nature of the sector, we can work more quickly, take more risk, be more creative, and work more effectively from the bottom up. And as many of us are embedded in the communities we work in we are more accountable to them. Our major fragility is our reliance on short-term funding.



What could be done better?

Many ideas arose during this part of the discussion, although these weren't solutions-based focus groups, below are some ideas of where improvement is needed with some suggestions of actions that could be taken:

- Third sector relationships with parent councils could be improved (or created). Parent councils are a key link, but the Third Sector isn't linked with them enough.
- SEEMiS is poorly used in Highland, use should be encouraged in schools more widely. This is a system that exists and is not being used to its full potential.
- Greater training for teachers on how to help students with ASN.
- Evaluation and understanding of the impact of investment – this data set could be better used to inform commissioning practices.
- In relation to the CAHMS waiting list, it was recommended that a pack (with resources, tips, etc.,) or something similar could go out to families while they wait.
- The Third Sector feels they are putting plasters on issues instead of addressing root problems, this being due to their diminutive size, short-term funding, and the lack of true partnership collaboration.
- Work to reduce the stigma around parenting training; or provide services in a different context that still fulfils this need.
- There is an increasing expectation from the public sector on the third sector, with a reliance that the Third Sector will pick up and carry forward services that the Council is withdrawing from, with no discussion about how the Third Sector is resourced to provide these additional services. Better communication and resourcing needs to be developed into current relationships.

“Really good intention and partnership working”

- Better communication mechanisms between the Third Sector and Statutory bodies needs to be built.
- There is a hesitancy to access services in one's own community, and individuals are not feeling safe to admit help is needed or they don't want to identify the need within themselves. Supporting individuals to access services outwith their community should be supported.

“The Third Sector are being expected to pick up on all the things the Council aren't”

- There is a growing concern that with further funding cuts to public sector services that additional duties will not be met, piling on those that are still not being met.
- Resources and capacity need to be allocated to improve relationships between third and public sector to improve trust and collaboration.