

The ‘Named Person’ debate: The case for

Mike Burns

Keywords

Named Person, Getting It Right For Every Child, Curriculum for Excellence, child protection

Corresponding author:

Mike Burns, Head of Children’s Services, Glasgow City Council.

My argument in support of the Named Person

The term GIRFEC gets banded around so much these days that it has become just another piece of obscure professional jargon. What it represents is far better served by giving it its full title: Getting It Right For Every Child. In that title the word ‘every’ is critical, because it captures a universal aspiration to make Scotland a better place to grow up for all children, while at the same time emphasising that we must do more for the most vulnerable, marginalised and neglected children. [Social Work Scotland’s](#)¹ Children and Family’s Committee has a direct line of sight to these children and communities, and we are confident that Getting it Right For Every Child - and in particular the Named Person - presents a critical opportunity to ‘break the cycle’ of poverty, disadvantage and poor life chances which characterises the lives of thousands of people in our society.

It was Detective Chief Superintendent John Carnoghan (2014), of the former Strathclyde Police, who had the courage to stand up and say Scotland did not need more police officers, but rather more nursery nurses and health visitors. Similarly, as social work leaders we understand that you cannot solve social problems just by throwing social workers at them. The profession exists to address the most acute needs of the few, not the significant needs of the many. We want to see more families supported earlier; in the way they want, before the need for acute interventions arises. This is why we are keen to promote and support the work of our colleagues in health improvement, health visiting, nurseries, schools and the third sector. It is these professionals that hold the key to resolving our social problems. And it is these professionals who will play the role of Named Person.

Prevention is undoubtedly about early identification, but more importantly – and I need to credit Susan Orr, Head of Social Work Services in Glasgow, with this observation – it’s about early engagement. We need to capture those early engagement attributes that divert families away from acute services.

¹ Leadership organisation for the social work profession in Scotland.

Attending a family support project recently, I got speaking to a number of parents. I asked why they had waited so long to get help, and why they had approached the project in the depths of despair, and in the middle of a crisis. For anyone who works in social work, the response was familiar: 'We didn't come to the project because we thought you had to be under Social Work'.

The word 'under' just about sums it up. But this view is still common because we do not, as a society, encourage people to seek out support at the earliest opportunity. I often quote the Canadian professor who having worked six months in Scotland commented that he could not understand how a country as small as this had made giving help to people so difficult. The Named Person, I believe, is our chance to start turning that around. It is not, despite what some commenters are saying about having a social worker for every child. It is about children, young people and parents getting the help they need, when they need it.

Audit Scotland, in their previous review of public sector efficiency (2010), noted that the relationship between the individual and the State needed to change. Key stakeholders needed to do more, and that included enabling parents to be empowered to fulfil their own lives and make their own choices. The Named Person is one part of the plan to help deliver that aim.

Getting It Right For Every Child is about getting childhood right. It is about our culture, and our capacity for compassion. It is about our willingness to nurture, our attachment to all citizens and our commitment to restorative approaches that will help to tackle some of Scotland's deep rooted social problems. With an emphasis on the word 'deep'! We all need to parent better and we all need to nurture better. Helping each other is about *us*. It is about the collective.

Will Hutton, at the most recent Social Work Scotland conference, highlighted that we need to challenge the current narrative which presents individualism as superior to the collective. In truth it is tough and challenging to parent on your own. I respect and to some extent understand the deep human instinct to nurture our children close to us. But that does not mean we need to bring children up without help. Indeed we need to develop and nurture our young people so that they can engage with the world. The Curriculum for Excellence underlines the attributes that are required from our young people to prosper in a modern society. Who is going to do that, if not us working collectively?

In leading the Early Years Taskforce on '30 months to first year at primary school', it has become evident to me that we need to focus on what makes our children ready to learn. Without doubt we need to move from identification to early engagement. We also need to move away from a culture of referrals to a focus on help when required. To do good work with families, you need the time and the trust to build effective partnerships. Moreover, as Professor Bridget Daniel has identified, to get outcomes you need to know what works. There is an abundance of evidence and practice wisdom in Scotland to demonstrate that early intervention, early engagement and early support help parents to help themselves. The Named Person offers a signpost to assistance. Parents need to call on that support and, when necessary, be directed and empowered towards a different path. And in a

sense, the Named Person is about facilitating 'a nudge' – or as it would probably be in Scotland, 'a shove' – within the system, to make sure families get the services they need, when they need them.

We still need that nudge, because frontline services have to be geared up to support relationships with children and families. Relationships built on certain attributes:

- Open and respectful;
- Trusting and reliable;
- Kind and enthusiastic;
- Nurturing and challenging;
- Dignity at all times.

These attributes are teachable, learnable, readily accessible, and these are attributes that many of our staff display on a daily basis. But getting us to the point where all services reflect these qualities is still a wicked problem. And we have learned from the implementation science work of Melissa Van Dyke at CELCIS that legislation, the production of guidance, the dissemination of information and training are insufficient strategies when used alone to solve this wicked problem. It has become evident that thoughtful and effective implementation strategies at multiple levels are essential to any systematic attempt to improve the lives of children, families and adults.

We need to shift the frontline workforce from a focus on assessment, procedures and compliance towards evidence based support and help. Moreover, we need to ensure that intervention with vulnerable and chaotic families is thoughtful, measured and outcome focused. We still require a comprehensive and cohesive preventive strategy that is owned, understood and contributed to by all stakeholders across Scotland.

The Named Person is now in statute, so let us get on with making it work. Who would have believed that prior to the ban on smoking in public places that we would have adapted so quickly.

We need to capture and secure the positive local stories about how this innovation has worked, feeding them back into our national discussion so that they can contribute to its continued development and implementation.

Undoubtedly, there are already a range of positive initiatives across Scotland that highlight early intervention and early engagement work. Joint support teams, nurture groups, breakfast clubs linked to homework and attainment, networks of family support evidence that desire to break down barriers and promote choice and support to parents and children. The Named Person represents a further conduit to facilitate and ensure that assistance is available to prevent crises, and 'nip problems in the bud'.

To do this the Named Person will need clarity about the population of concern, and who is going to make the changes, and what collective measures we are seeking to achieve. And the skill set required by the Named Person, particularly around engagement, should not be underestimated. But it will remain the case that the quality of our multi-disciplinary practice will be the defining feature about what works. It is worth reflecting on that previous review of child protection, in which the child said – 'it's everyone's job to make sure I'm alright'.

Recent significant case reviews have highlighted the numerous failed opportunities for protection, and there is a palpable sense of anger when children's lives are lost. The missed opportunities are not simply about protection though, but about those missed chances to provide support and help to parents or carers. The Named Person is about both prevention and child protection. It is about the continuum of care and support. Bill Alexander (Director of Care and Learning at Highland Council) has rightly highlighted that the role of the Named Person places a compulsion not on parents, but on the child care system.

We need to understand that the Named Person is about putting the recommendations of the [Christie Commission](#)² into action. It is about early identification, engagement and prevention. Within Scotland we continue to grapple with significant social problems around alcohol, drugs, domestic violence, the role of men/fathers, mental health, poverty, poor housing and unemployment. The Named Person exists to help parents to get help if they need it.

And in that sense we now need to recognise that the Named Person is there to promote parental rights and responsibilities, not infringe them. Like children's rights, parental rights can only be truly activated when parents are given the appropriate support and opportunity to exercise those rights.

To make childhood in Scotland better, we need a change in culture, and we need a shared public service agenda which is focused around prevention, parenting and family support. I remain optimistic that we have the capacity and the foundations to deliver that. If the Named Person contributes to fewer suicides, less alcohol abuse, less domestic violence and fewer prisons – and if all that means we need fewer police officers and fewer social workers – then I for one welcome it.

References

Audit Scotland (2010). *Improving public sector efficiency*. Retrieved from www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/docs/central/2010/nr_100225_improving_efficiency.pdf

Carnochan, J. (2014). *Conviction: Violence, culture and a shared public service agenda*. Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing.

² Commission of the Future Delivery of Public Services in Scotland.

About the author

Mike Burns is head of children's services at Glasgow City Council. He has extensive experience of managing health and social care services in six Scottish local authorities, and with the Glasgow Community Health and Care Partnership. Mike is convenor of the Social Work Scotland (SWS) children and families committee, is a member of the Scottish Government's Early Years Taskforce, and GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child) Board. He represents SWS on the Government/CoSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) Raising Attainment and Closing the Gap Board, and is the CoSLA representative for children and young people's services.

This work is licensed under a Strath-one Licence