

The Children's Services Reform Research study is a Scotland-based research study being undertaken by CELICIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection. In 2022, CELICIS was asked by the Scottish Government to carry out this research study with the aim of gathering evidence to inform decision-making about how best to deliver children's services in Scotland in light of the proposed introduction of the National Care Service, and its commitment to Keep the Promise of the Independent Care Review (2020).

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Context of the research

In 2021, the Scottish Government published the findings of an Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland (Feeley, 2021) and recommended the creation of a National Care Service for adult social care. Later that year when Scottish Government launched its consultation on the National Care Service, it included a proposal that children's social work and social care services should be included within it. Whether or not to integrate systems, processes, services, or agencies is a big decision. When the systems in question include the nationwide delivery of support through children's social work and social care services, the implications are even wider.

In this context, it is important that decisions are made with the fullest understanding of available evidence and information.

How we did this research

This rapid evidence review is the first strand of work within the Children's Services Reform Research study. We gathered, analysed and synthesised evidence primarily from peer-reviewed research papers nationally and internationally to answer the following research questions:

- What models of integration exist for the delivery of children's social work services with health and/or adult social care services in high income countries?
- What the strength of evidence is about their effectiveness in improving services, experiences and outcomes for children, young people and their families?

Rapid evidence reviews are a method for conducting an assessment of the evidence relating to a specific question(s) using structured and documented methods, within a tight timescale.

About the Children's Services Reform Research study

The purpose of the research study is to answer the question: **"What is needed to ensure that children, young people and families get the help they need, when they need it?"**. The study has four separate strands of work, which together aim to provide a comprehensive and holistic approach to answering this question. A final report will be published at the end of the study which will draw together and synthesise all four strands of the findings to address the research question.

An Independent Steering Group chaired by Professor Brigid Daniel, Professor Emerita at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, has supported the design, implementation and delivery of the research study.

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What we found

Lack of evidence of models of systems-level integration

The studies we reviewed were based to a large extent on *service* and *team* integrations, rather than macro-level *system* integrations. This means that whilst the evidence may be strong in relation to what works at service-level integration, it gives little information as to the impacts, benefits, and challenges, that may be encountered in system-level integration, thus it does not allow us to draw any firm conclusions or recommendations in relation to large-scale systems integration.

Integration should be viewed as an outcome of a range of components

We confirmed that 'integration' as a concept is difficult to define and articulate. The studies' authors often spoke of 'integration' without defining what they meant, what the objectives of integration were or what it aimed to achieve, or how this would be done. This may be because a singular definition of integration is neither straightforward to identify, or perhaps useful, in many contexts.



Figure 1: Components model of integration

Through the process of the review, we developed a 'components of integration model' which combines the different perspectives of what integration 'is' across the papers.

The value of this model lies in allowing a more nuanced understanding of integration, not as a singular process activity, but as an outcome of a broad range of components, the importance or impact of which will vary within different contexts. It thus allows both the 'features' of integration and the 'activities' of integration to be incorporated.

The place of shared culture, with committed leadership at all levels

A shared culture with committed leadership at all levels appears to be a significant facilitator for integration.

Strategically, leaders need to drive change and connect with those implementing change. Operationally, the workforce needs time to build new relationships across different professional peer groups and have the support from and confidence of leaders, including managers, to develop new shared ways of working.

Commitment is needed from the early stages of driving change to when integrated structures are more embedded, which take years, not months. Governments need to support transformational reform

Assessing the quality and strength of the evidence

We approached the assessment of the evidence regarding the effectiveness of integration on improving services, experiences and outcomes in two ways: firstly assessing the *quality* of the evidence presented in each paper and then considering the *strength* of that evidence in the context of what we found.

Our analysis suggested that the *quality* of the studies was high. The studies were carried out to a high standard, and we are confident that the findings presented are an accurate reflection of the context and experiences studied. Given the predominance of small-scale qualitative studies and few longitudinal studies that provided data over a significant time period, caution must be taken in assessing the *strength* of the evidence presented and in generalising these findings to other populations, systems and processes. Where a body of evidence was either particularly strong or had limitations, we highlighted this our review.

programmes involving integration through clear direction, aligning legislative and policy agendas, properly resourcing integrated efforts and providing the necessary context for integration.

Professionals need appropriate support, resources and time during the process of integration

Implementation of an integrated service or system requires significant, long-term, commitment and resourcing from the highest levels of political and policy leadership if it is to be successful.

Where integrated services worked well together, there were benefits of improved levels of professional skills and knowledge, greater sharing of knowledge and expertise, and changes to practice including more time working directly with children, young people, and their families.

There were also a range of lessons and challenges which are applicable to workforces across different areas, services, and interventions, which included increased workloads, particularly an increase in 'unseen' work such as the time it takes to build and sustain relationships with colleagues from different disciplines and the importance of clear roles and responsibilities for all team members.

Supporting and supportive relationships are vital to integration

Relationships are vital in providing support to children and their families. The importance of relationships also extends to how integration is experienced and facilitated by and for professionals. Not enough emphasis can be placed on the importance of relationships to the success of service or system integration.

It is important to allow time for trusting relationships to develop. Time spent together with a consistent professional allows understanding, and the trust that comes with that, to develop. Young people, parents and carers alike reflected on the importance of a strong relationship with a relevant professional and highlighted the challenges of developing such relationships with multiple professionals from multiple services.

For professionals, there are links to being co-located, but the evidence indicates that co-location without the additional time needed to meet, discuss, and build and maintain those relationships, is not sufficient.

If integrated services and systems can be delivered through a professional who has the time to spend building and maintaining a trusting relationship with an individual or family, then integration could contribute to a more effective response and outcome for children and families.

The central importance of holistic practice with children, young people and families

The importance of holistic practice was a consistent theme throughout this review. Whilst only a few services may have explicitly set out to provide holistic support, the importance of seeing the child, young person, parent, carer, and family *in the round*, appeared in many papers. This is especially apparent in the limited information available from the studies on what children, young people, parents and carers value in services.

More evidence is needed about the impact of integration on rights

Across the evidence we reviewed, there was a lack of discussion or consideration of the rights implications of integrative efforts. Many papers at some point referred to the 'empowerment' of individuals, as well as the importance of people needing and using services being central in identifying and shaping the provision of appropriate services, but there was no discussion of these ideas from a rights-based perspective. It is critical that efforts are made to understand the impacts that the integration of public services might have on the realisation of rights.

The importance of involving children and families needing the support of services in the design and implementation of integration

The papers in this review paint a picture of extremely limited involvement of the people who use the support of services in the research about those services. Understanding the experiences of children, young people, parents and carers is vitally important. The Promise of the Independent Care Review in Scotland (2020) noted the tendency of services and systems to measure predominantly process based indicators, which are often easier to measure, rather than the things which are meaningful to children and families. We can see this in the research we reviewed: those who are easiest to involve in

research, the professionals, were included in great numbers, while children, young people, parents and carers were only meaningfully represented in a small number of studies.

While it is important that we use existing information already gathered before we seek out new information, the evaluation of future integration efforts should prioritise the consistent and systematic gathering of feedback from those who use services on their experiences, before and after any change, and how these could be improved.

There's a complex relationship between integration and outcomes

There were very few longitudinal studies we were able to review, and even fewer which looked beyond a two-year timescale in their assessment of the integration efforts. This current lack of research studies completed over a long time period means that the strength of evidence focused on the impact of integration is currently limited. It also takes time to implement meaningful change, which we know needs to be measured in years (Fixen and Blase, 2019). Many of the outcomes which are hoped to be achieved as a result of integrating services are also inherently long-term, often seeking changes to behaviours or experiences for large portions of the population, and are unlikely to be observed within a timescale of months or even two to three years.

Given the limited strength of the evidence reviewed in the study, there is little evidence of a causal link between integration and outcomes.

Conclusion and next steps

This study has set out the evidence from the studies we reviewed so that anyone thinking about or undertaking efforts towards integration in the context of services for children and families can learn from what is already known. This evidence has also provided the first indications about some of the things which may be needed to ensure that children, young people, and families receive the support they need when they need it, which is the overall focus of the Children's Services Reform Research study.

While the review was undertaken to contribute to decision making around the future delivery of children's services in Scotland, we have identified issues which are relevant to policy makers, commissioners, service managers, and practitioners outside Scotland. This information can help inform all services that work with children, young people, and their families, whether these are still being designed or are well-established, specialist or universal. This knowledge may impact upon funding, staffing, aims and objectives, measurement of success, management structure, and more.

This rapid review is the first strand in a series of four, collectively known as the Children's Services Reform Research study. The findings of this review have been carried forward into the design and delivery of the other four strands of the study, and will be brought together for the final research report, due to be published later in 2023.

References

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About CELCIS

CELCIS, the Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection, is a leading improvement and innovation centre in Scotland. We improve children's lives by supporting people and organisations to drive long-lasting change in the services they need, and the practices used by people responsible for their care

For more information

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